Carrion Duty

Necrospace - 5

Sean-Michael Argo

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Annotation

Hostile salvage confirmed. Rhett Calibos is a bounty scrapper, his life as an indentured soldier a welcome alternative to imprisonment on a penal colony. A man haunted by his past, Rhett throws himself into the work, his only sanctuary. Sokol Targe is the leader of a mech warrior squad, stationed aboard an ancient and deadly warship, and conducts violent raids on behalf of a Red List commune. Cast away from corporate society, they have embraced the ravager way of life. As these troubled men endure furious combat across the ragged edges of civilization, neither of them realize they've become entangled in the deeper mysteries of necrospace. It's a hard universe, and nobody gets away clean.

- Sean-Michael Argo
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Sean-Michael Argo
CARRION DUTY

PROLOGUE

It is the Age of The Corporation.

The common man toils under the watchful eye of the elite and their enforcers. The rules of law have long been replaced by the politics of profit. For many centuries, the Covenants of Commerce have ruled mankind, from boardroom to factory floor, from mine deep to fertile field, upon the battlefields of heart, of mind, and of distant star.

The dark ages of feudalism have returned with capitalistic ferocity. There is no peace among the stars of mapped space; business is booming.

Impoverished workers drown in debt, laboring for subsistence pay. Mercenaries of every kind wage war, loyal to the banner of any company willing to meet their price. Everyone in existence is locked in a ceaseless struggle for economic dominance and survival. Scavengers and space pirates swoop in to loot what they can from the forgotten and unprotected.

To be a human being in such times is to be one among countless billions in a civilization spread across a vast universe, all ensnared in the same blood-soaked web of capitalism, most doomed to be ground to dust amidst the gears of progress.

There are some people, however, those rare few, who rise from the ranks of the faceless masses, to make their mark upon history.

This is one such tale.

1. PIPELINE T4

Rhett Calibos flexed his right hand for the seventh time since sliding his fingers into the tight mesh interior of the armored glove. He had worn such a glove on countless occasions, nearly every day since he had graduated from the Rubicon cor-sec academy, and that was years ago. It was as if he couldn't quite get comfortable with it, and no matter how many times he clenched and unclenched his fist the armor just didn't feel right.

He could sense the eyes of the other troopers in his unit upon him, and Rhett forced himself to stop flexing. Everyone got a case of nerves before a mission at some point in their career, he reassured himself, and there was nothing to be concerned about. He told himself that this was a routine crowd dispersal operation, even if it did come with a forcible relocation mandate.

The cor-sec trooper shook in his seat as the transport rumbled over the broken ground of the unforgiving planet's surface. Rhett looked up from his hand and let his gaze sweep across the interior of the transport.

There were twenty-nine other troopers with him, all similarly strapped into seats that lined both walls of the squat vehicle. Designed for rapid deployment of its human cargo, it was a tight fit, with only enough space for two troopers to stand shoulder to shoulder in the aisle. He had ridden in such vehicles before, and had deployed from them on numerous occasions. What struck him as odd, was that this transport was a raid model, designed for combat missions not relocation.

Cor-sec forces were responsible for protecting Rubicon assets throughout the Tardis sector, which was close enough to the frontier that space pirates were a legitimate problem. They would attack the raw material shipments while in transit from the various mines and drill sites to the refineries. Rhett had been deployed on counter-raids against pirate incursions several times since graduation, and always it was from vehicles such as this. Crowd dispersal was certainly within the scope of this transport, but with the forced relocation mandate, the mission parameters were out of sync with the vehicle.

Rhett wondered how the troopers were supposed to relocate any of the trespassers without the holding pods that were a feature of the detainment model transports. He hadn't seen any such vehicles in the convoy that left the cor-sec motor pool half an hour ago. Nor had he seen collection cages or net casters attached to any of the sleek black VTOLs that moved through the sky above them.

The troopers had been given orders to muster and kit up rather

suddenly. Only now did Rhett realize that he had been issued only his needle rifle and high yield tesla pistol. Neither of those weapons were fit for riot duty, much less detainment. For that, he and the rest of the unit should have been issued shock mauls and resistance shields, with gas launchers for overwatch. This had all the hallmarks of a combat op, regardless of what the official orders read.

Rhett flexed his fist again involuntarily as he began to wonder what exactly Tardis management had planned.

He knew that the situation on T4 was already on the knife's edge and if cor-sec came in hot, things might go from bad to worse. Suddenly, the needle rifle slung across his chest felt heavy and cold.

The trooper ran the scenario through his mind over and over as he tried to make sense of the mission, hoping to find some scrap of understanding, to balance the equation before his boots hit the ground.

Tardis contained several small planets that orbited a relatively young star, in geologic terms, and those bodies were rich in raw materials. Rubicon surveyors had discovered much wealth to be had within two of the planets, designated, unimaginatively, as T1 and T2. Rubicon had acted quickly to claim all the rights to the sector. They registered their quiet title with the rest of corporate civilization and planted enough military might in the sector so that no one dared challenge the execution of universal deeds.

There were no fresh worlds in mapped corporate space, and it was a tremendously expensive process to discover, claim, and exploit new planets. The frontier was a raw and wild place, where heavenly bodies were young and difficult to predict, as they were still in the long process of becoming mature, stable planets or stars. New worlds and systems had to first be discovered, then surveyed for analysis, and assuming there was enough future profit to be had the planet had to be claimed, and most difficult of all, held. For most corporate powers, it made more sense to continue to fight over the dwindling resources of mapped space, though on rare occasions sectors like Tardis were indeed claimed and developed.

Without opposition or challenge to their claim, in the boardroom or on the battlefield, Rubicon held the deeds to the entire sector. They were free to exploit the planets as they saw fit.

The problem was the Red List squatters who had been living in the system for decades, perhaps even longer. Unlike sanctioned pioneer communities like Longstride and Brin's World, the small privately owned properties like the ocean resort world Abzu or the fortified asteroid belt of the Folken mercenaries, the red listers had no recognized claim.

The frontier was popular with red listers, castoffs of the corporate

world who lived their lives without the burden or the benefit of any kind of citizenship. Necrospace on the frontier was just as dangerous as it was in the corporate sectors. Instead of abandoned factories and spoiled planets ruled by scavengers, the red listers out here were faced with hostile alien planets and exposed to the predations of pirates. Most red list ships and populations who left corporate sectors and went to the frontier were soon gone, swallowed up by an unforgiving universe. By simply still existing after decades of settlement the red list community on T4, who called themselves the Dunhills, had beaten the odds. At least, Rhett thought, as he flexed his hand again, until Rubicon discovered them.

They lived mostly underground, in natural cave networks that had been heavily modified by digging and using construction equipment they'd brought with them from corporate space.

Rhett didn't know that much about the Dunhill's story beyond the basics. They were a red list flotilla that had formed over many years, wandering necrospace and surviving day to day, like most red listers. At some point they made the choice to try life on the frontier, and found what became known as the Tardis sector. They traded in barion, the less stable but more affordable alternative to xaxos, which is what drew them into the cave network and afforded them enough wealth to maintain their supplies and pay the protection money demanded by local pirate bands.

Rubicon surveyors found the Dunhills when planning the refinery complex and starports that would define the struggle for T4. The planet was ideally positioned in the system for transit in and out of the system, depending on where in the universe one was bound. Starports on either pole of the planet allowed the vast quantities of materials pulled from the sector, mostly T1 and T2, to be transported back into corporate space.

Initially, the managers of Tardis were willing to allow the red listers to remain, so long as they paid for the privilege. With the pirates driven away or wiped out by cor-sec troopers such as Rhett himself, the Dunhills just started giving Rubicon the protection money and shipments of barion.

Should have known that wouldn't last, Rhett thought. The transport shook again as the yellow warning lights switched on. Yellow meant they were two minutes out.

Rhett flexed his fist once more, unable to stop himself.

The massive refinery that was fed by the entire system was on T4, and now that the second starport was finally complete, the pipeline that would connect the refinery and the starport ran right through the Dunhills settlement.

It was a hard universe, but no one had it as tough as the poor

souls on the Red List. They might have their freedom, but it was a desperate kind. Without a corporation to call their own they had no rights or support. If Rubicon decided to change the terms of their agreement, or break whatever treaty they wished, it was the corporation's prerogative and there was nothing the red listers could do about it.

Sadly, the Dunhills appeared to think that they had some say in the matter, hence the likes of Rhett and his unit being deployed today.

"One minute!" said Proctor Usef as the cor-sec unit commander stood up from his seat, holding himself steady by grasping one of the many handholds hanging from the low ceiling. "Riot units have isolated most of the protestors, but things have gotten ugly since we left the motor pool. The Dunhills leaders clearly haven't gotten the message and are encouraging their people to resist. No shots fired yet, but it's only a matter of time if we don't stomp this out. We're going to give them a show of force so profound they'll have no choice but to submit. Everybody switch on!"

Rhett and the rest of the unit unfastened their chair straps and got to their feet. The trooper grasped a handhold with his left hand as he cradled the grip of the needle rifle in his hand. He still didn't feel right about their lack of non-lethal equipment, though the Proctor's words settled his nerves slightly. Perhaps the sight of a veteran unit of armored cor-sec troopers would rattle these people and convince them to lay down arms.

Plenty of the Dunhills protesters out on the line had seen the heinous fighting between cor-sec and the pirate brigands who used to rule T4. Rhett himself had seen into the cave homes of the Dunhills after he and a group of troopers had pursued a pirate insurgent down there. The Dunhills didn't have much, he knew that, but they'd have even less once Rubicon drove them out of their settlement. They were about to be forced off world, either aboard their own ships with their freedom intact or on detainment vessels bound for labor camps across the Rubicon corporate empire.

It wasn't much of a choice, Rhett realized that, but he had a job to do, and if he didn't do it someone else would. Security was a common profession in Rubicon, throughout corporate civilization actually and he would rather be here quelling a riot than working in a factory or code house. Cor-sec pay was good, and other than brawling with unruly labor gangs or the occasional combat raid, it wasn't like he was in a full military profession.

As the warning light changed to red, indicating thirty seconds till deployment, Rhett was silently thankful that he'd never married, much less started a family. If he had one, he might feel guiltier about displacing these people. He already had a bad case of the nerves as it

was without it being compounded by seeing the faces of his own family reflected back at him in those of the Dunhills.

"Fangs out, gentlemen," said Proctor Usef just before the transport lurched to a halt, making all of the troopers stagger for a moment as they held themselves upright.

The hatch of the transport opened and the Proctor disembarked first, rapidly followed by the rest of the troopers. In seconds, a full thirty-man unit of armored security staffers bounded from the transport. They were all veterans. Without a word, they formed a tight V-shaped wedge.

Rhett flexed his fist as he found himself at the apex of the formation, the tip of the spear. This time his hand was filled with the grip of the needle rifle. He swung it up to make it level with his chest, tucking the short stock into the crook of his shoulder.

Rhett swept the area in front of him and peered down the iron sights of his weapon to assess the vivid display before him. The situation in Dunhill had deteriorated significantly just in the hour since the mission briefing. Hundreds of people were massed just outside the cave network, providing the troopers a keen reminder that a population census of the Dunhill settlement had never been done, nor had a full schematic of their settlement been created or demanded. Tardis managers simply had not cared enough to bother with such details, and now it was coming back to trouble them.

Several columns of cor-sec troopers in riot kit stood behind portable barricades. It was all they could do to keep the multitude of protestors at bay.

Nobody was openly assaulting the officers, but the pushing, shoving, and shouting of the mass of angry people made it clear that a violent outbreak was soon likely. Rhett could sympathize with management's decision to escalate the situation by a show of force, but had he been in charge he would not have handled it the same way.

What, exactly, he would have done, he had no idea, but as the trooper held his needle rifle before him and watched the shock of their presence began to register on the faces of the dissident squatters, he knew it would still not have been this.

Four units of troopers advanced upon different spots in the line of protestors. Above them, several VTOLs circled the settlement, the mounted weapons of the fliers tracking targets as they moved.

"Deploy verbals and maintain pace!" ordered Proctor Usef through the unit com channel. "Push them back!"

Rhett keyed his helmet's microphone with his chin, as did the others in his unit, and began to speak.

"*Trespassers Disperse!"* bellowed Rhett through his helmet's

speaker system. His voice and those of his fellow troopers boomed out over the discordant shouts of the protestors. *"Fall back and return to your homes! Deadly force is authorized! Trespassers Disperse!"*

Rhett repeated himself as he and the other troopers advanced past the Rubicon lines. The cor-sec barricades were moved out of the way of the V formation, leaving nothing between the menacing troopers and the agitators.

The crowd fell back in shock as cor-sec marched through the line and into protestor territory. Dunhills began falling over each other in their haste to move away from the troopers. For a few moments, it looked to Rhett as if management's plan would work. Already hundreds of people were turning their backs on the troopers and fleeing down into the settlement, away from the guns and the noise of the microphones.

It almost worked.

Then shots rang out.

Rhett didn't know who pulled the trigger first, only that it wasn't him. His finger was flat against the body of the rifle, just above the trigger, of that he was certain.

Rhett was a veteran cor-sec trooper. Despite his case of nerves, he maintained trigger discipline. He was so focused on the verbals and the forward march that he did not notice the firefight until he was in the middle of it.

The sharp staccato sounds of needle rifles were suddenly coming from both his left and right. In front of him people started jerking back or collapsing as blood blossomed from multitudes of wounds.

A hard round struck Rhett in the chest, failing to punch through his armor, but hitting him hard enough that he went to his knees. His heart fluttered in his chest and the trooper sucked in his breath.

In basic, the hand-to-hand instructor always insisted that the real fighters were the ones who could rise up and win after that first hard hit to the face and that what you did after that hit was what made you a soldier or a casualty. Rhett had always been good at the brawl once things got started. As it had many times before, his training took over and before he was fully aware of what he was doing the trooper surged back to his feet and fired his rifle into the crowd.

He did not see the shooter, but knew that whoever it had been was out there in front of him and before his full awareness could catch up, Rhett engaged the enemy.

Rhett squeezed the trigger and his rifle spat a high velocity needle round into the chest of an older man who seemed to be swinging something at a trooper near him. Whether it was a walking stick or some kind of weapon Rhett couldn't tell. By the time the man fell into a heap on the broken ground, the trooper was sighting in on another

protester. Rhett moved his rifle in search of threats. It was nearly impossible to tell who was a combatant and who was simply a protester. What had been a noisy gathering of angry Dunhills had become a bloody melee as troopers and VTOLs unleashed death upon them.

A trooper suddenly went down beside him and Rhett saw a young Dunhill woman wielding a stubby shotgun rack the slide to chamber another round. She was close, perhaps having used the chaos to appear non-threatening until the formation marched over the fallen to reach her.

By the time Rhett got her in his sights, she had blasted another trooper off his feet, a man named Blaine, who had graduated from academy in the same class as Rhett. The woman screamed in pain as needles from another trooper ripped through her leg. The sound was short-lived as Rhett's own needle hit her just behind the ear.

More shooting caught Rhett's attention and he spun around to face the sound, bringing his rifle up and taking a knee.

Moving through the crowd, was a young man carrying what looked to be a semi-automatic pistol. The man fired at the trooper formation again before attempting to flee, which proved a fatal mistake as Rhett and several other troopers sent a salvo of needles into the shooter and three other protesters unlucky enough to be near him.

More of the crowd dropped their weapons and attempted to escape from the troopers.

"Weapons free! All Dunhills considered hostile!" called Proctor Usef over the unit channel and Rhett could feel the bile rising in the back of his throat.

"They're running away, sir, we don't have to-," protested Rhett before the proctor cut him off.

"Management just authorized a purge order!" snapped Usef, his words punctuated by a VTOL that sped over them as it strafed the crowed with devastating accuracy, mowing down dozens of fleeing protestors. "Do your job, Calibos, or get retired!"

Rhett stood still for a moment, the bloody chaos surging around him. Suddenly, he was struck in the back of the head, but the helmet absorbed most of the impact. He stumbled, but didn't go down. Swinging his rifle around, he looked for a target.

Behind him was a young man, a boy really, who couldn't have been more than twelve standard years old. In the boy's hand was a rock breaker. Had the child known how to properly ignite the hydro-trigger, the tool would have easily shattered Rhett's helmet and pulped his skull.

Perhaps it was the hit to the head added to the dull pain in his

chest from having been shot already, the sight of Blaine dying next to him, or perhaps it was all of those things combined.

Kid or not, as the youth raised the breaker to resume his attack Rhett fired his needle rifle from the hip. The first needle hit the boy in the stomach. The next three speared his chest and sent him to the ground in a heap.

Rhett turned to finish off another wounded Dunhill who had been crawling towards a discarded pistol, then took stock of his position. His units had already advanced without him. He looked around him as the VTOLS wiped out entire groups of fleeing people while columns of marching troopers pushed others further and further back into the caves.

A tactician possessed of the coldest of hearts might have ordered the Dunhills forced into the caves so that napalm loads could be dropped by VTOLS through the entrances and exits. Burning them out would be easy, and save individual troopers the grisly task of rooting the red listers out of their cave chamber by chamber.

Rhett knew that was a fantasy, and when the order came from Proctor Usef to pursue the protesters into the caves, the trooper bitterly acknowledged the terrible wisdom in the strategy.

The barion was still of value, though it was unstable and highly reactive. By taking the caves with infantry the raw materials would be preserved and mined for profit once the more valuable substances had been depleted. Rubicon would probably tap and cap these caves once they'd taken what was needed to clear a path for the pipeline, allowing them to sit silent for decades before opening them again to resume extraction.

Progress was as merciless as it was unstoppable.

He squeezed the trigger again and a protester went down with needles in her throat, followed by another who hurled a spanner at Rhett before being pierced. Rhett shrugged off the impact of the spanner and marched forward, firing into a cluster of Dunhills attempting to traverse the rugged terrain towards one of the cave entrances. He did not waste his time aiming, simply allowing his instincts, his enraged primitive side, to guide him.

He hated the Dunhills at that moment, for their defiance and their unwillingness to bow. Most red list communities were haggard, temporary things, not functional settlements like this, and the events of today were a reminder why. If there was any patch of dirt worth owning it been claimed by a corporation or soon would be. Any red list tribe that attempted to give up the nomad life inevitably ended up at odds with corporate interests.

He wasn't sure how many of the Dunhills he'd killed in the madness of these last few minutes, following orders without question,

seeing the abhorrent gusto with which some of his comrades hurled themselves into the needless slaughter.

His left hand began to clench and unclench as he looked around him, more bodies falling to the ground every second, unaware that he had stopped firing.

Gun clutched against his body, finger still on the trigger, he moved forward, stumbling over the twisted bodies of dead and wounded protesters, their shrieks and cries of pain and anguish louder than the gunfire.

Rhett saw Proctor Usef and two other troopers exchanging fire with a handful of armed protesters. The Dunhill fighters had found a decent vantage point in the rocky terrain, one that kept them somewhat out of sight of the VTOLS. It was a difficult position to assault and a trooper's corpse lay on the ground between the two groups.

"Calibos, engage!" shouted Proctor Usef before going back to peppering the enemy position with needle fire.

Rhett found that he could not bear the sight of the Proctor. That he hated Rubicon as much as the Dunhills.

The callous arrogance inherent in the idea that this tragedy was business as usual, that the displacement of an entire people was an acceptable way to reduce the cost of industrial expansion. The pipeline could have been re-routed and the Dunhills left alone, but that would have come at an increased cost. Slight as it would have been, the expense over time was deemed unacceptable to the Bottom Line.

The lives of the red list were nothing, it was more cost effective to displace them and when the protests erupted, cheaper still, to purge them.

Orders were orders. The Proctor wouldn't have questioned them or given a damn about the consequences.

Rhett raised his gun and fired, driving a needle round through the base of Proctor Usef's skull.

"Nobody gets away clean," he growled over the unit channel.

The Proctor sank to his knees, the weight of his armor pulling him down, face first, onto the rocky ground.

The two cor-sec troopers next to him stopped shooting at the Dunhills, their weapons slack in their hands, gaping at what their comrade had just done.

Seeing the cor-sec leader gunned down by one of his own men had stunned everyone, both troopers and Dunhills, halting the momentum of pitched battle.

Rhett knew the Dunhills would fight till the last, now that they'd seen the truth of Rubicon's worldview, but he would no longer have

any part in it.

Rhett let the needle rifle fall from his hands as he walked past the dumbfounded troopers and made his way towards the position the Dunhill shooters had been holding until moments before. By the time he reached it, the fighters had escaped, leaving behind only the bodies of those slain in the exchange before Rhett interrupted by killing his superior officer.

The trooper looked at the broken and bleeding bodies of men and women, their eyes open, many of them still clutching their meager weapons.

How long he stood there he had no idea. Before he was fully aware of what he was doing, he went to his hands and knees and lay down among the corpses. Resting his back against the rocky ground he stared up into the swirling gas clouds that passed for the sky on T4.

He wept then, his chest racked with sobs as his mind began to catch up with his body. The adrenaline was wearing off, and the madness of battle gave way to the crushing awareness of his actions.

He put the pistol to his temple and willed himself to squeeze the trigger while he still quaked with fighting energy, yet found he could not muster the fortitude to fire and finally let the pistol fall to the ground.

They found him like that, several hours later, lying among the dead, the shell of a man who had fled the atrocities of his own hand.

2. BOUNTY SCRAPPERS

Rhett flexed the armored fingers of his right hand, memories of the Dunhill Massacre still fresh in his mind even with ten standard years between now and that grim day.

It was always right before the deployment that they came flooding back, crisp in their detail as if he'd just been there yesterday.

The trooper shifted in his grav-couch and tapped his finger against the smooth metal of his combat assault rifle, the steady beat giving his awareness something to focus on instead of the horrors of his past. It was a little trick he'd learned in the Ma-gur penal colony while serving out the sentence he'd been given after being court-martialed over the death of Proctor Usef.

Those two troopers had lied for him, claiming that the Proctor's death was a friendly fire incident, which was all that had kept him from the firing squad. While the living standards had been modest to say the least, there was a staff counselor who specialized in rehabilitation techniques.

Rubicon might be as ruthless a corporation as any of the others, yet the value of human life was at least considered as something marginally more than a simple asset. Unlike some corporate societies, most notably the nearly medieval and pitiless Grotto Corporation, once an individual with an otherwise clean record entered the penal system there was a modicum of effort placed upon enabling the convict to return to society in some capacity upon serving their due sentence.

I served it and then some, Rhett mused as he continued to tap out a steady rhythm with his finger.

The warning light went purple, and a voice in Rhett's comm-bead said, "Thirty seconds to drop. Last looks, Calibos."

Everyone has a different lighting scheme, Rhett observed as the seconds ticked by in the dull purple light, but the process is always the same. The trooper looked around the small compartment and did a visual inspection of his squad, each of them encased in the same patchwork body armor he wore. No two of them were alike, as every piece of equipment they possessed had been bought or bartered from dozens of different sources on an individual level. The only requirement from their employer was that their composites could handle void seals.

Bounty scrappers spent most of the time conducting their affairs in hard vacuum, so their employer had determined long ago that uniformly high quality void seals were a justifiable expense. The individual scrappers might be debt-bonded low lives, but each one of

them represented some level of investment on the part of their employer.

Rhett silently moved his gaze from one scrapper to another, looking for the telltale signs of improper seal lock and making sure nobody had incorrectly threaded the fast-release straps on their grav-couches. Rhett's three main cutters were Vader, Doak, and a woman everyone just called Sparks.

All of them had properly strapped themselves into the low seats of the grav-couch and all were sealed. Their welding tools were clipped to their chests and it looked as if all of them had remembered their sidearms this time. Sparks especially was terrible about remembering her weapon. It had been a long time since the crew of Vulture Six had encountered a hostile salvage, but Rhett knew from experience that the moment they lost their vigilance was when people would start to die.

With the thought of pending combat nagging at his mind, replacing his fiery memories of T4, Rhett stopped tapping his finger against his rifle and flexed his hand as he continued his inspection.

Dante and Drago, twins who hailed from Aegis Corporation, were his combat overwatch team. While everyone aboard *Vulture Six*, other than the pilot and captain, was one kind of trouble maker or another, the twins were unique in that regard. Both were former members of a Fenrir gun cult, having been raised as extremists and firearms fetishists since childhood. The group was purged by Aegis cor-sec, the inevitable fate of all such radicals, and the two youths were placed into a rehabilitation program.

Rhett took note of the dual sidearms riding each man's thighs, the extra magazines that were slotted into nearly every available space on their armor, and the customized combo-guns that each carried as a primary weapon. Clearly, they had chosen recidivism, though for the purposes of carrion duty in the depths of necrospace, their presence was most welcomed by the squad.

Lastly, Rhett inspected Quinn Eros, the squad's engineer. She had a knack for fabrication and had created most of her own armor, outfitting it to be ideally suited for her tasks during salvage ops. Her sidearms were in place, her void seals were good, and the case which contained all her various diagnostic and appropriation tools was secured.

Rhett may have been her squad leader, but he had not been granted access to any of the background files on these people. Most of them wore their sins on their sleeve, just like he did, though Quinn had never let on to whatever calamity had led her into this life of debt-servitude.

The universe was a hard place, Rhett reminded himself as he

double checked his own void seals and settled his shoulders in preparation for the pending deployment. Anyone could end up out here in necrospace hunting for scraps.

"Vultures, ready," said Rhett into his comm-bead, his voice chiming inside the helmets of the squad and into the headsets of the staffers on the bridge of the ship.

"Good hunting," came the traditional response from Captain Estrada, which also served as their launch order, and as the words were spoken the hatch of the dropship blew open.

As soon as the hatch was open, the troop compartment of the small dropship depressurized as it hit vacuum, the force pulling hard against the squad inside. Rhett felt the straps of the grav-couch release in time with the hatch, and he was sucked out of the opening into space.

The dropship, little more than a troop compartment with several micro-thrusters, piloted remotely from the bridge of Vulture Six, had rapidly arrested its momentum with reverse burn and ejected its human cargo a mere hundred meters from their target. The grav-couches were positioned to release the squad in a cascading fashion during decompression so that the seven vultures would be hurled towards their target with enough speed to swiftly arrive and yet not enough to kill them, usually, if they collided with the target before achieving control over their trajectory.

Rhett looked in front of him as he soared through open space and saw the target. The corpse of a starship designated AG16 hung in the cold void just under one hundred meters from his encroaching position. As the trooper closed the distance with the massive vessel he could feel the gentle pull of its gravity speeding up his approach. From the look of it, the ship had not suffered overmuch damage from whatever fate had befallen it. There was little in the way of debris in orbit around it.

It was obvious, though, something nefarious had taken place. Rhett was soon able to see several blast points on the far side of the ship's hull, though it would take a closer examination to determine if the wounds were inflicted by ship-to-ship weapons or an internal explosion.

Perhaps, if Rhett had been part of the cor-sec navy, he might have had the knowledge to tell from this distance.

Vitrian Holt, the pilot of *Vulture Six*, had insisted from their initial recon sensor sweep that it was assault damage. It was better to be prepared than not, and while the *Vulture* had modest armament in the form of a skirmish class burner lance, it was far from being a combat vessel, so the dropship was launched with Rhett's squad to investigate before *Vulture Six* came any closer. If this was a hostile salvage it was

better for the squad to handle it in close quarters than to risk the ship.

Even out here, it's all about looking at the risk and reward for the Bottom Line, snorted Rhett to himself. He rotated his body to the left and squeezed the trigger of his compressed exhaust booster to avoid crashing into a table-sized, jagged piece of metal that hung in orbit around the dead ship.

According to the bounty brief, the AG16 was an Aegis agri-hauler, a rather sizeable vessel that was designed to transport enough raw material to feed a work colony or industrial outpost for decades. In the ship's hold there would usually be a plethora of active seeds, rich soil, fertilized water pods, and UV panels that could be powered by anything from combustible fuels to battery power depending on the capacities of the facility.

Aegis Corporation, as a general practice, was a company keen to enable its various ventures, both in mapped territories and necrospace, to be as self-sustaining as possible. The Aegis philosophy was one of heavy initial investment followed by minimal maintenance and the realization of incremental, but reliable returns.

In many ways, these agri-haulers and those outposts functioned similarly to the crew of the *Vulture*, Rhett mused realized as he prepared himself for landing. Each of the crew had been functionally purchased by agents of Aegis and were expected to out-perform the purchase price over time.

Rhett knew exactly what it had cost Aegis to buy out his penal sentence, and though he'd served admirably as an indentured bounty scrapper for five years already, there was a long way to go before the return on investment would be sufficient. Time to do the job or get retired, Rhett said to himself, and he prepared for impact against the aft section of the ship, furthest from the blast points.

The trooper squeezed the exhaust booster once more and expertly degraded his momentum enough that he was able to slam his boots against the hull of the ship and bring himself to a full stop. No sooner had he made the landing then he activated the mag-clamps on his boots. Low grade magnets held him in place with sufficient force to keep him from floating away but still allowed him to walk along the surface of the ship. In rapid succession, the rest of the squad made it shipside. Within thirty seconds of deployment the seven-person squad was moving briskly across the hull to the hatch that Quinn silently pointed out to them.

She had no doubt already put in the time to become intimately familiar with the internal layout of AG16, thought Rhett as he clomped across the hull, having likely studied deeper than just accepting the cursory schematics the squad had been provided with at the briefing. Rhett kept pace with Quinn, and the rest of the group fell

in step behind them, with Dante and Drago bringing up the rear. They reached the hatch several minutes later, long enough for the lazy spin of AG16 to put *Vulture Six* on the other side of the hull and out of sight.

"Calibos," said the voice of Captain Estrada through Rhett's comm-bead, "Now that we are spinward our instruments are reading that the fore section of, looks like, deck three still has pressure."

"Still not picking up any power sources?" asked Rhett as Quinn knelt before the hatch and motioned for Vader to accompany her.

"Negative, completely dead in the water," responded the captain, "However, Calibos, be advised, we are now registering a number of heat sources that are disconnected from the ship systems."

"Could be that somebody got that part of the ship sealed up before everything decompressed," observed Quinn as she used a high rpm drill to bore a hole through the hatch, and then handed that off to Vader before she snaked a thin camera cable through the hole, "They'd be floating ice cubes by now of course. Maybe somebody has an active thermal rig."

Rhett and Vader exchanged a look of exasperation at Quinn's apparent need to state the obvious, and in Rhett's mind it was something of a defining trait about the young woman. They were still glorified grave robbers, thought Rhett as he watched Quinn moved the cable around and watched what the camera saw on a wrist mounted monitor, a little respect wouldn't kill her. After a few moments, Quinn retracted the camera cable and gave Rhett the thumbs up.

"Nothing out of the ordinary, just floating cabin debris," Quinn reported, "The bounty for AG16 is nice and fresh, only six standard months, so most of the ship's core systems shouldn't have degraded past the point where I can't jumpstart them. We might have to limp her back to the yard if the steering is fried, but I should at least be able to get us into the mainframe."

"We limp or tow everything back to the yard, Quinn, it wouldn't be on our list otherwise," said Rhett, ready to get on with it, "Okay, people, let's open the door and get this day done."

At his command, Vader and Doak slid telescoping prybars out of their utility belts. The two men set the flat heads of their bars against the seams of the hatch, preparing themselves to pry open the door as soon as Sparks finished her work. The young woman knelt before the hatch and reached into her breaching kit to produce a compact high yield cutting torch of Grotto design. She pressed the tip against the seam of the hatch. The tool formed a seal over her target, allowing for the heat of the flame to do its work without being instantly snuffed out by the unforgiving vacuum of space. In seconds, Sparks had worked the torch over the areas where she knew that the hinges were

embedded, having studied the make and model of AG16 enough to make an educated guess.

When she hit the last hinge, Sparks nodded. In response, Vader and Doak heaved against the handles of their prybars. The hatch rattled as the ambient heat created by the torch rapidly expanded, the force of the micro-burst of kinetic energy giving Vader and Doak just the boost they needed to slam the hatch open with enough speed that if there was a threat waiting behind the hatch the others would have a clear field of fire.

The group stood silently near the hatch for nearly thirty seconds, giving time for whatever ghosts that might be trapped on board to leave. It was a long-held scrapper superstition that Rhett considered rather out of place in this somewhat secular civilization. However, like the rest of the team, Rhett kept with tradition and stood in silence for the space of three breaths, and then it was time to go to work.

"Making entry," announced Rhett and he stepped out over the open hatch and deactivated the mag-clamps on his boots.

Without the small magnetic bond the trooper's body was immediately subject to the modest gravity of the ship's bulk, which gently pulled him through the hatch and into the vessel. As he made the near seven-foot drop to the floor of the compartment Rhett activated the lighting tabs on his shoulders and the spot beam on his helmet. His boots connected with a muffled clang as he landed and immediately re-engaged his clamps. The ship was in a slow spin and Rhett wanted to work relative to the vessel, his new world for the time being. Rhett raised his rifle and moved forward, making room for Dante as the gunman made his own landing.

Rhett pressed onwards with Dante at his back, knowing that the rest of his team entered behind him. Quinn's observations held, and Rhett plowed through a small cloud of cabin debris that looked to be an assortment of tools and personal effects. As his lights shone through the compartment he confirmed that they indeed had entered through a standard crew launch chamber. The team moved through the open doorway at the back of the compartment and plunged further into the vessel.

They moved down a silent passageway that connected the launch chamber and a staging area. From the size of the hatch and attached chamber, Rhett was somewhat certain that this was a crew deployment series of compartments. Judging from the amount of assorted debris still floating around, the explosive decompression that often ravaged entire ships when damaged, had not occurred here.

The gravity generator might have been deactivated or destroyed, and while this section did not have pressure at present, the debris present indicated that it had been a slow atmospheric degradation.

Likely this section of the ship was sealed off directly, but small stress fractures at various points could cause loss of cabin pressure without the kind of rapid change in atmosphere that ripped everything apart. This was a good sign, and at least indicated that the ship was likely worth the bounty placed on it.

Rhett came to the end of the passageway and saw that the door was ajar, though upon closer inspection, he saw that the sliding barrier had been bent sufficiently to pull it off the track and make fully closing it all but impossible.

As he heaved the door open with his shoulder he could see that someone had been hacking at the metal, causing several rents in the door and bending it. Perhaps someone was attempting to get through the door by hacking out the lock, that or trying to prevent anyone from getting through from the other side. In the half-light of the dead ship it was tough to tell.

Rhett entered the crew chamber with his rifle at the ready, the beam of his helmet light cutting through the cloying darkness like a laser. Soon the ambient illumination of the light tabs embedded in the armor of the other scrappers made the room generally visible.

At first, it appeared to be of little consequence, just another room to pass through on their way to the ship's command bridge, which happened to be on the, still, pressurized deck three.

Along the far wall of the room was a long row of void suit racks, a dozen at first glance, which would have been used by the ship's maintenance crew for any external repairs or dock work needed. The tool lockers on the opposite side of the room for the most part lay open and had been stripped bare. Every drill, welder, spar and spool was gone. Bits of disposable equipment packaging floated through the compartment, along with several glittering crystals of what appeared to be machine oil.

But it wasn't oil.

3. ALL HANDS LOST

"Overwatch, eyes on!" whispered Rhett harshly, for a moment forgetting that even if he'd been screaming his voice would not have carried past the confines of his helmet.

"That's frozen blood, Papa," observed Doak in his exceptionally gravelly voice as he slid his sidearm out of its holster and thumbed off the safety. The man's thick Jotan accent marked him as hailing from one of the harshest factory worlds operated by Aegis. "And somebody still on that rack."

"Dante, overwatch, Drago, on me," Rhett ordered crisply as he toggled the rifle's safety off and began tapping his finger against the metal just above the trigger.

Rhett stepped closer to the rack of void suits, his light clearly showing the suit bore multiple, ragged tears and was soaked with blood, the body of the crewman still inside. The suit was still strapped into the rack, the person obviously having been assaulted while trying to don the void gear.

Staring at the viciously mutilated corpse had Rhett's every instinct screaming at him to get the hell back to the *Vulture*.

Something was terribly wrong here.

"Look like he got went after by a safety axe," observed Doak, clinically. He gently prodded one of the deep chest wounds with his pistol. "That one there what did him dead."

"I did not see any corpses on the outside of the vessel during our approach," said Drago, reminding Rhett of his presence. The trooper realized he was starting to let the strangeness of this salvage make him jumpy. "If anyone had opened the exit hatch everything in here would have been sucked out."

"So, we have a minimum of eleven void suits and a full locker of tools missing," nodded Rhett as he turned around, not wanting to brush away the ice and blood crystals that obscured the face of whoever lay dead inside the ravaged suit. "Obviously, I'm calling this a hostile salvage. Lethal action authorized. Captain, confirm."

"Hostile salvage confirmed," came the voice of Captain Estrada through the team's comm-bead. "Management concurs, proceed with impunity, Calibos, secure my ship."

Rhett backed away from the mangled corpse and turned his attention to the door leading into the rest of the ship.

"Dante, take point, Quinn, get us to the bridge," said Rhett. At his signal, Dante plunged into the darkness, followed by Vader and Quinn, each with their pistols out. Rhett, Sparks, and Doak moved through the door next, with Drago bringing up the rear.

Rhett knew that the official record of this operation would now contain the force confirmation and concurrence by Estrada, which would insulate the trooper and his team from any punitive fines related to the seizure and delivery of this prize.

Scrap bounties were issued to individual ships in the Vulture fleet, and once the quarry was found, it was the responsibility of the teams to maintain as much inherent value as possible. Careful salvage was critical to ensure that no further damage was done to the prize. Without a proper record of authorization, the teams could be fined for any collateral damage they caused in the taking of said bounties. Self-defense was a factor taken into consideration when assessing the fines, maintaining clean records of communication and salvage protocol kept the team from risking the very paychecks they were risking their lives to make. Aegis might not be the feudal juggernaut that Grotto Corporation was, but the company was not in the business of allowing its citizen employees to take liberties with the Bottom Line.

The AG16 was a sizable ship, nearly four times the size of *Vulture Six*, this was due, in no small part, to the massive agri cargo compartments. In many ways, to hear Quinn say it, the ship resembled the skeleton of a giant fish. Most of the ship was a long corridor that ran the length of the ship, sectioned off by a series of sealed doors. At each cross section a shorter passageway would lead to one of the many cargo compartments. Near the front of the ship there would be a second deck that was general crew barracks, rec rooms, med bay, and such, with a third smaller deck being the bridge, which housed command quarters, navigation, engine ops, and communications.

As the team moved through the passageway, Quinn began performing localized sweeps with her diagnostic rig. In the tight confines of the ship Rhett wanted any extra advantage he could get. The motion trackers would be mostly useless, given how much background noise there would be with all the debris floating around. Still, the sight of the bloody murder in the staging chamber had rattled him, and if someone out there ignited a heat source or enough things started moving suddenly, he wanted to know.

“No ambient radiation out of the ordinary,” said Quinn as they passed by the sealed doors leading into the first of the engine chambers. “You want to give the engine rooms a visual?”

“Considering what we just saw, I don’t want to get trapped down there. Drago, take overwatch, Vader, back him up, the rest of you, with me,” said Rhett as he swept his rifle through the half-light of the passageway. “We need to make sure there aren’t any containment problems or breaks in the lines. No sense in going through the trouble of getting to the bridge if we are just going to blow out this section of the ship as soon as the power is back on. Quinn, let’s make this fast,

okay?"

Dante stepped in front of Rhett as Sparks and Doak pried open the hatch leading into the engine compartments. The gunman clomped over the deck plating and moved into the darkness with his combo-weapon at the ready. Rhett swept in behind him and the two men played their lights over the chamber, both regretting doing so immediately.

The walls were streaked with blood in several places, some of it frozen and hanging in the air, but much of it staining the wall itself. In addition to that, there were a number of spent shell casings that glittered when their lights shone across them and multitudes of tiny metal balls, most of them warped and pitted.

"That blood was spilled before the power went out, before they lost gravity," observed Rhett as he took in the sight of the room.

"Small caliber impacts on the far hatch and in the floor on your right, naval sidearms, maybe two shooters. Shot clouds are twenty gauge, but clusters are thin so there's got to be at least two bodies somewhere who soaked up most of the blasts," Dante said as he toggled his weapon from assault mode to shotgun. The activation indicator switched from the semi-automatic rifle barrel at the top of the weapon to the bulkier shotgun muzzle that protruded from the center. "Pistol shooters were either untrained or desperate, cutting loose without regard for firing discipline, but they hit at least one person before getting blasted by our shotgunner, that's your exit wound splatter on the left. This was fast and nasty."

Rhett was impressed at how swiftly the former cultist could judge the room, then again, being a lifelong Fenrir gun worshipper had given Dante an eye for such things.

While murder and violence were not express tenets of the gun cults, a group of people could not hold firearms and the use thereof in such fanatic reverence without eventually getting into a fight with someone. Such was the logical conclusion and bloody end to the Fenrir groups as a rule and it always amazed Rhett in the study of history that the worshippers never seemed to figure out this simple truth.

To watch Dante express his former life path in such moments, there was a kind of mystique that enshrouded the utility of it. Rhett could see why the powerless members of corporate society might gravitate towards the worship of such raw power. Regardless of politics and psychology, Rhett found the twins particularly useful to have around, as did his employers.

Rhett moved into the room as Dante covered him. The trooper discovered that the passageway at the end of the chamber was open, leading to three different smaller engine compartments in addition to

the primary machine housing. Rhett gestured for Sparks to move up with him as he directed Quinn and Doak to pair off.

"We'll take the left, Quinn and Doak the right, Dante, keep an eye on that primary hatch till we're clear, then we all hit the engine room," commanded Rhett as everyone filled the room.

Rhett moved carefully through the chamber, taking in the closer sight of the various bullet impacts, shell casings, and blood stains. This had indeed been a furious conflict, even if short, and oddly, it didn't bear the usual markings of a boarding action. If this vessel had been hit by pirates they would have stripped away every last thing of value by now, and there were far too many pieces of critical systems that remained unmolested for piracy.

Ravagers were known for their bloodthirsty tactics and tendency to slaughter entire crews, though as a rule, they would have hauled the ship back to whatever den of horror they called home and added it to their collection of useful trophies. Slavers would not have been so violent. No, there was something entirely abnormal about the fate of the AG16, and Rhett found himself tapping at the metal above his trigger again.

The trooper entered the side chamber and was met with more signs of intense violence. This time, he could clearly see that several control decks had taken direct hits, and his hope of re-awakening the engine to make for a swifter haul back to the yard began to waver. Without Dante's keen eyes the trooper wasn't sure just what happened in the room, but he could see that it had been a close quarters firefight, and nobody wins in such conflicts. Sparks was hyperventilating, Rhett noticed, and the young woman's eyes were wide with fear.

"Easy, Sparks, easy, whatever happened here isn't our problem," Rhett lied, hoping that his cutter's relative newness to the job, and the fact that she'd never encountered a hostile salvage, might help her believe his fiction. "I know it looks bad, and it probably was, but you see this sometimes. Rough stuff happens in necrospace, but it's over, this is ancient history."

"I hear you, Calibos, I do," nodded Sparks, clearly trying to convince herself to believe her commander, even if the evidence of her eyes insisted that she fear for her immediate safety. "It's been six months since AG16 went dark."

"That's right, Sparks," assured Rhett as he gently put himself between her and the grisly sight of the room, herding her back into the passageway. "Six months of hard vacuum will pretty much take care of anything."

"More of the same back there," said Quinn as she and Doak joined the group. "Somebody ripped out the processors and tried to make a

sort of barricade with them, but I don't think it worked."

"Without the processors, we won't be able to control the engine from the bridge," cursed Rhett.

"I might be able to work a bypass if we run a sync cable over the hull and bring it directly to the engine itself," suggested Quinn helpfully. "We'd have to drill the hull and put a seal on it, but that's easy enough. Just have to get the spool from *Vulture Six*."

"Which means we've got to sweep the ship, now that we've been confirmed a hostile salvage, Estrada won't approach until we have eyes on bodies," said Rhett as he made his way to the hatch for the prime engine room with Dante in step behind him. "Doak, crack this thing for me."

4. THE SMILERS

Moments later the group of scrappers stood in the engine room, the massive machine looming ahead of them, easily the size of a small building. Their lights did little to pierce the gloom of the tremendous chamber, though what they could see was enough to make them happy for what they could not.

Corpses, at least five of them, had been lashed to the engine with an assortment of cables and wires. Each of the bodies was encased in a void suit, ravaged by wounds from a combination of bullets, shot, and bladed objects.

As Rhett stood in silence, looking at the bodies with a mixture of horror and morbid curiosity, he noticed that he could actually see the faces of two of the former crew members. They were the two bodies hanging the lowest, making him remember that without the mag-clamps on his boots the tallness of the engine would not have mattered and someone could have easily moved the bodies where they pleased. He shined his light directly into the faceplate of one and stifled a gasp, one that Quinn finished for him as she followed his light with her own.

“He’s smiling,” breathed Quinn, seemingly blissfully unaware that Rhett could see the same thing.

Through the faceplate, Rhett could see that the corpse was indeed, smiling, though upon further observation the man’s smile had the rictus angle to it, as if he’d died in the midst of a powerful muscle contraction or seizure. Rhett moved to the next corpse, also a man, and he, too, was smiling wildly despite the obvious trauma of his violent death. The trooper noticed that both individuals had sickening white and green flecks around their noses, eyes, and mouth.

“Quinn, get your diagnostic, set it for organics, I want to know what that is growing on their faces,” ordered Rhett, shaking his head and steeling himself for the mission once more, “Sparks, take an electrical bit and drill out this guy’s faceplate. Everybody double check your filters, I know we’re in vacuum, but just do it.”

As the two women moved to follow his orders the team’s comm-bead suddenly erupted with noise.

“Contact! Contact!” came the voice of Vader, “Drago’s hit and he’s not moving!”

“Steady now, Vulture. Hold your position,” said Rhett with some authority, suddenly feeling calmer now that the shooting had started, as if a flood of tension resulting from this silent tomb of a ship had been released, “Pull Drago into cover wherever you can find it and return fire. We are on our way.”

Rhett turned and started moving out of the chamber, several steps behind Dante, who had already broken ranks, no doubt his eagerness to come to the aid of his twin overwhelming his mercenary's sense of squad cohesion.

"Quinn, get me an answer on those bodies then form up and hold this room until I give you the all clear," ordered Rhett as he picked up the pace, not wanting to fall too far behind Dante as the former cultist rushed headlong through the maze of darkened corridors. "Doak, you're on overwatch. This whole ship is hostile, so if anyone approaches that isn't us, you shoot first."

Rhett could feel the dull thud of Vader's pistol as the force of the weapon reverberated through the walls of the dead ship, something it would not have done had the vessel been fully functional. Something about gunshots in dead space had always felt rather ominous to Rhett, as if they were a stark reminder that silence and freezing cold were the natural state, and all warmth, life, and light were anomalies upon the face of hard vacuum.

"Vader, sitrep!" shouted Rhett as he saw Dante leap through the dark hatch and rush down the passageway towards the fray, his weapon at the ready.

"Multiple hostiles, sir, they've got guns," responded Vader, inadvertently reminding Rhett that other than the twins he was the only other scrapper with legitimate combat experience.

"What's the visual?" snapped Rhett, his frustration mounting as he lost sight of Dante. "Who is out there?"

"It's the ship's crew, I think," said Vader, his voice shaking, "They're wearing Aegis void suits."

Rhett hurled himself out of the hatch and looked down the passageway just in time to see Dante unleash several blasts from his weapon, presumably at a target out of Rhett's sight, further down a side passage. Suddenly the multitude of passages in the cross-section chamber were much more menacing, and Rhett imagined that a determined foe with intimate knowledge of the ship could move through not only the usual corridors, but also the various access tunnels, air shafts, and utility tubes that served as the ship's circulatory and respiratory system.

As if to confirm his musings, Rhett watched in shock as an attacker in a void suit emerged from a utility tube and started firing its pistol at where Vader and the wounded form of Drago had attempted to take cover. Dante had plunged further into the network and the former cultist was expertly toggling back and forth between his assault rifle component and his shotgun component as he sent withering amounts of fire in multiple directions. By the time Rhett, no slouch when it came to swift and decisive action himself, got his rifle

to his shoulder, Dante had already drilled the new attacker with several deadly rounds and moved onto other targets.

Rhett felt more than heard the hatch open above and behind him. He threw himself to the deck, twisting as he fell, and raised his rifle.

A smiling crew member looked out at him from behind the grimy faceplate, the green and white growths on her face making her look hideous and less than human. His swift maneuver saved his life, as the attacker squeezed the trigger of her weapon and sent a focused beam of energy slicing through the space where Rhett had stood only a moment before. The beam cut into the metal wall of the passageway and down into the deck plating, the smiler tracking the trooper with her weapon as he scampered backwards. Rhett pulled the bull-pup stock of his compact rifle into the crook of his arm and fired wildly as he reached out with this free hand and grasped for purchase.

The smiler did not flinch as several rounds bit into the edge of the hatch in addition to one punching through her upper chest. She continued to move her beam across the floor to chase the trooper.

Rhett's hand found a depression in the floor, a maintenance panel that had either been torn open or left open. He managed to get his gloved fingers around the lip of the panel and heaved himself across the floor, cursing the mag-clamps on his boots for preventing him from just kicking off and sailing away from danger. There had been no time to shut them off and had he not reacted so swiftly the beam would have been the end of him. As it was, the smiler kept moving the beam towards him, though now that he had a split second to adjust his aim Rhett drew a solid bead on the attacker.

Rhett squeezed the trigger five times in rapid succession, missing only the first time, before three rounds put holes in her chest and the last shattered her faceplate.

The smiler's grip on her weapon tightened as the nerves in her dying body caused all her muscles to constrict, worse than Rhett had ever seen in combat. It was as if she had been struggling against convulsions before he had ever shot her, and death made it all the worse. The beam went off track, scorching a deep cut through the far wall of the passageway before mercifully sputtering out as the power supply was drained. Finally, the smiler stopped contorting, and her corpse just bobbed gently in the extremely low gravity, the crystalized blood from her wounds creating a sort of macabre asteroid field around her.

Rhett ignored the sounds of Dante continuing to battle the unknown number of assailants as he got to his feet and took a moment to look at the woman's body more closely. The beam weapon was actually just a standard ship's maintenance tool that appeared to have been modified for handheld use.

Normally, beam tools like this were used for cutting away massive sections of heavy material. It was for emergencies, when a ship's crew needed to decouple from something, was tangled with a large piece of debris, or needed to drop one of the tremendous cargo containers in the event of a catastrophe or toxic spill event. To use such a tool as a combat weapon, especially in the void, was evidence of desperation or insanity. Rhett was beginning to suspect the latter.

The trooper looked down the passageway towards the rest of his team. Dante stood with his back to the wall next to a small, open chamber door leading into the room where he'd seen Vader dragging Drago only moments before. Rhett started making his way to them, taking care to check every corner, vent, and hatch as he went, determined not to be the victim of another bushwhack attempt. No further attacks came, and as Rhett reached the trio he could see the bodies of three more smilers floating lazily in the low gravity.

"I'm getting a lot of shooting and not nearly enough reporting!" snapped the voice of Captain Estrada in everyone's comm-beads, "Get your people online, Calibos!"

"Drago is down, but alive, med update to follow. Four hostiles in the hurt locker, equipped with assorted small arms and converted ship's tools. Aegis void suits on all of them, something not right about them, possibly a shipboard disease," said Rhett as he took Dante's overwatch position so that the twin could care for his brother. "Quinn, give us a sitrep on the engine room."

"Chamber is secure, Sparks has done a sweep and we're clear," responded Quinn over the comm-bead, "Samples of those growths on the corpses are being worked now, this diagnostic kit is a little outdated so it will take a few more minutes to get a reading."

"There you have it, Captain," said Rhett as he watched Dante crimp the feed line on Drago's tanks before tinkering with the output mixture. From the looks of it a bullet or bit of shot had damaged the regulator on the twin's atmosphere supply, disrupting the delicate balance of breathable chemicals. As Rhett watched, Dante adjusted the chemicals. He could see that Drago was already beginning to come around. The former cultist might have some brain damage to cope with after being out cold for several minutes, but Rhett supposed that beat getting shot and freezing to death from the inside out.

It was standard training for soldiers who experienced void combat to learn how to rapidly apply void patches over exposed wounds, though Rhett had to admit that even he had not received more than a few hours of training in that regard. Cor-sec troopers weren't scrappers, and most maintenance crews only wore void suits so weren't accustomed to wearing modified body armor in hard vacuum. Rhett made a mental note to bring that up with the Captain once they

finished this scrap job, as this could have been a needlessly fatal encounter for Drago had the bullet impacted just a few inches differently.

"Noted," responded Estrada, "Proceed with the mission, Calibos, at least now you have some idea of what you're up against."

Rhett wanted to say something pithy, but restrained himself. Captain Estrada was not a man to antagonize, and not only because he was the captain. Both Captain Edmond Estrada and pilot Vitrian Holt, were debt-free Aegis corporate citizens, and had a vested interest in the bounties collected by *Vulture Six*. Their percentages were tiny compared to the employer, more so as they were off-set by the salary they both drew, but it was enough that neither man had much of a sense of humor when it came to the Bottom Line. Rhett kept his mouth shut and waited for Dante to get Drago to his feet.

"Okay, team, we rally here and press onwards. We can't be sure of the enemy's numbers, but we've just had a confirmation about their disposition with regards to our interest here," said Rhett as he swapped out magazines, "We can assume they'll attempt another ambush, but I'd rather fight them here than out on the hull."

Minutes later Drago was back online and insistent that he was ready for action. Quinn, Doak, and Sparks joined the group and as a team the bounty scrappers moved out. Rhett took point, having decided that if there were any kind of IEDs or booby traps set in their path, he was most qualified to notice them. Pirates in the Tardis sector were notorious for their judicious use of such tactics, something that had made them particularly difficult to engage. More than once Rhett remembered wiping the remains of a comrade off of his helmet's visor before finally running the last of the pirates to ground.

They moved slowly and carefully, each of them keeping an eye on the various hatches and corridors. Rhett mused to himself that while the team had encountered a few hostile salvages in the years they'd been together, this one was easily the most disturbing. It was one thing to shoot it out with a gang of low rent space pirates or to drive off a clutch of desperate scavengers, but this mission had become something out of a nightmare.

"Calibos, heads up, I've got your analysis, this old thing finally crunched the data," said Quinn, taking Dante's place behind Rhett as the trooper picked his way down the main corridor of the ship, the team having reached the midway point. "It's organic, of course, a rapidly self-propagating fungal body. The kit can't lock down an identification, which I hope you realize is disconcerting, but the closest thing it can pin it to is ergot. That's a kind of grain mold."

"Could be something happened to the food stores," observed

Dante from behind Quinn, “If a seal was broken, maybe.”

“Possibly, or the contaminant was present in the mess hall stores, then it…” Quinn nodded.

“Quinn, reset your kit, I see something,” interrupted Rhett as he shone his light down the corridor. All their lights were bouncing off something hanging in the passageway, like a thick fog held in place by the freezing cold and the lack of gravity.

“That’s Bay 7, according to the ship schematic,” added Vader as the team got closer.

“I want to focus on getting to the bridge. We know we have a fight coming our way, but grab a sample as we pass through,” said Rhett, “the ship is our bounty, not the cargo, but I don’t want the folks at the yard dealing with any surprises.”

The corridor widened to where the team could walk several abreast. As they moved through they could see that many of the cargo hatches were open. More blood crystals hung in the air through the compartment hub, and as the team moved across the gangplank that led over the interior staging area Rhett could see more stains on the floor. A small skid loader looked to have been intentionally rammed into the hatch of one cargo container, pinning the hatch closed with its loading spars. Judging from the amount of blood and debris, not to mention bullet holes and blast scoring throughout the hub, this had been where the serious business had happened.

The sight of so much implied violence kept the group silent, even Quinn, who stopped to take a sample of the fog coming from Bay 7 before following the rest of the group.

There were no bodies visible, yet something about what he’d seen in the engine room was causing Rhett’s imagination to run wild with images of what might be waiting behind the blocked hatch or what lurked menacingly ahead of them. This was a true death ship, the sort of salvage that gave rise to myths and cautionary tales. There was no doubt in his mind that the fate of the AG16 was going to be the talk of taverns and tugs for years to come, he and his team just had to survive the scrap first.

“Take a good look, team,” growled Rhett, tapping his finger against the metal of his weapon, “Whatever happened here, there were no survivors, even the ones who are still walking around. Anything you kill here consider it a mercy.”

They carried onwards for what seemed like an eternity in the dark tomb of a ship, though Rhett’s mission clock only reflected ten standard minutes before they reached the crew deck.

Rhett moved his helmet back and forth and sucked in his breath as he took in the sight of the main recreational chamber. The windows that connected it to the crew barracks had been broken or shot out,

and the hatches leading into the various bedrooms and bathrooms were all either open or haphazardly barricaded. It looked as if the entire second deck had been rapidly transformed by an outbreak of violence. It was a battlefield much like the cargo hub, only added to the chaos was a sea of floating debris consisting of what would be considered non-threatening items. Playing cards, bedding, sporting equipment, clothes, electronics, and many other such items drifted silently alongside clouds of frozen blood and spent shell casings. So much death and destruction had befallen this ship.

Without warning, Drago opened fire into the darkness, and was answered by the muzzle flash of a smiler's shotgun as it briefly illuminated one of the shadowed bedrooms.

Rhett caught movement in his peripheral vision and saw that another smiler had launched itself across the rec room towards him. It was wielding a vicious looking power drill and a heavy wrench as the smiler plowed through the thick debris with great momentum, intent upon engaging the trooper in close quarters. The dull thud of pistol fire filled the space as Doak and Vader both opened up on one or more smilers who appeared to have been attempting to flank the team by emerging from several grated ducts in the ceiling.

In an instant, the team was beset by attackers, only this time the vultures were ready.

Rhett swiftly sank to one knee as he pulled his combat rifle snug against his shoulder in order to fire upon the drill wielding smiler who was bearing down on him. At the same time clouds of shot peppered the trooper, and though they were deflected by his body armor, the force of the impact threw his aim, causing his shot to go wide as the rifle was knocked from his hands.

Rhett's rifle was tethered to his utility belt. It sailed into the darkness and then the line pulled taut. Everything around him was in motion as smilers and vultures battled furiously in the half-light of the compartment, the strobe of muzzle flashes flickering in the tight space, making it difficult to see clearly. Rhett ducked as the smiler swung its heavy wrench through the empty space where the troopers head had been a moment before.

Rhett's cor-sec hand to hand combat training had been augmented by years in the penal system and it was all that saved him. As the smiler's wrench swept over him, Rhett instinctively reached out with both hands to catch the arm driving the drill towards his chest. His armored gloves locked around the smiler's forearm and wrist, which prevented the tool from impaling him instantly, though physics was for the moment an ally of the smiler. Rhett's mag-clamps kept him in place while the smiler, not similarly fettered, kept going, and the momentum of the attacker's body slamming into Rhett drove the

bit into the trooper's armor. Rhett was knocked onto his back and landed with the smiler on top of him as the nightmare person pushed harder against the drill.

He felt the pressure of the bit tearing through his armor and knew that in seconds it would rip into his body, not only causing a possibly fatal wound but also depressurizing his suit. Like most combat armor used by spacefaring professionals of all income and skill levels, the void seals would react to damage by flowing over the holes in the armor. It made surviving combat injuries in hard vacuum possible, though it was relatively easy to overwhelm the capacity of the seals with sustained fire, and the spinning bit of the drill had the same effect as it chewed at both armor and seal.

Rhett desperately pulled on the tether connected to his rifle with one hand, using the other hand to push back against his attacker, doing his best not to look into the faceplate of the smiler as it pressed itself harder into the back of the drill.

Suddenly, the rifle emerged into the light of Rhett's helmet and smacked into the smiler with enough force to distract it for a moment. Rhett snaked his arm under the smiler's and pushed up even as he released the mag-clamps on his boots so that he could kick out. The pair grappled over the drill as they soared through the low gravity, knocking aside more debris as they careened through the chamber.

Just before they collided with the wall, Rhett was able to reverse the smiler's drill and shove the point of the bit into the smiler's void suit while his enemy was still helpfully squeezing the trigger. In the next instant the smiler slammed into the far wall, or perhaps the ceiling, it was difficult to tell in this dark, low gravity environment. The force of their impact drove the bit deep into the attacker's chest. Rhett pushed with all his might and the drill tore messily through the void suit and body beneath, causing a rapid decompression which vented a stream of blood all over the trooper.

Rhett pushed himself back and engaged his mag-clamps. He yanked on his tether to catch his rifle, then took a knee again to assess the situation. In the short amount of time he'd been engaged with the drill wielding smiler, his team had been hard at work, but not without their own losses.

Ahead of him, Rhett could see Vader floating aimlessly through the compartment. As he watched the cutter's body turn in a gentle spin, the man's left shoulder and chest revealed itself as a grisly mess made by what the trooper assumed was a close quarters shotgun blast. A cloud of blood drifted along with him.

Quinn, Sparks, and Doak had their backs to the wall near the entrance to the compartment, each of them holding their pistols out in front of them. Nearby, the bodies of two smilers floated and leaked

rapidly crystallizing blood from multiple gunshot wounds. The steady strobe of weapons discharge illuminated the interior of the crew barracks, and in the swirl, Rhett could see Dante and Drago unleashing withering amounts of fire upon multiple targets, some he could see and others he couldn't. This salvage was hostile indeed, and as much as he wanted to get off this death ship and back to the relative safety of Vulture Six, the only way was forward.

Do the job or get retired, thought Rhett to himself as he pushed away from the wall and soared across the compartment towards the wild firefight, we've already paid the price for this haul.

The trooper stuck the landing at the entrance to the crew barracks. He could see through one of the shot-out windows that barricades had been erected on the other side of the primary door. When the trouble started, it looked as if at least a few people had closed the door, disabled the lock, and stacked what they could against it.

Cleary none of those people had been much of a tactician, thought Rhett. He moved through the open window and took a hastily aimed shot at a humanoid shape moving through the barracks towards the twins, or they'd have realized that the presence of the windows made this a terrible place for a last stand. He fired again and knew he'd scored a hit when the human shadow's trajectory suddenly changed and the body went smashing through a half-broken window. Rhett turned on his mag-clamps and threaded his way through the debris while putting two more rounds through the enemy.

The trooper would have liked to have backup as he moved through the barracks towards the command hatch, though it wasn't really the cutter's job, or the engineer's, to handle this sort of stand-up fight. Of course, they carried weapons, but it was the express duty of Rhett and the twins to do the heavy lifting when it came to hostile salvage operations. Vultures weren't Reapers by any stretch of the imagination, and at that moment Rhett wished he had a few more solid shooters on the team. Six was one of the larger ships in the Vulture fleet and she only had a crew of fifteen, and just under half were presently on AG16 engaged in a bloody struggle for control of the ship. He was on his own, and Rhett could do little else but shrug and get on with the task at hand.

He moved cautiously through the series of small crew compartments and found himself in the mess hall, with the command deck hatch just on the other side. It seemed as if the big show of force on display by the twins had drawn the smilers away from this area, though Rhett never let his guard down.

Instead of moving straight down the middle of the room Rhett hugged the wall and passed through the kitchen area. He saw that the

supply stores were all but exhausted, or had been moved elsewhere, and upon seeing the lack of supplies began to wonder what exactly these smilers were living on. Six months on the drift would be enough to draw the supplies of any ship down to just about nothing.

The trooper swept his rifle back and forth over the mess hall, taking in the signs of past struggles and realizing that while there were multitudes of trays, silverware, cups and the like floating in the dark, there wasn't a scrap of food to be had. They've picked the ship clean, he thought, and sickening thoughts of where the rest of the crew might have gone began rising up from the depths of his mind. Despite the nightmare unfolding in his imagination, the trooper was prepared for battle, so when a series of duct covers slid open to reveal two smilers he was on guard.

The first smiler slid out of the hatch and got off two shots that went wide, before Rhett mercilessly punched three rounds through the attacker's chest. As the dead madman flew backwards from the force of the impact, another, this one wearing mag-clamps, leapt over an upturned table and hurled what appeared to be a hull bolt that had been converted into something like a javelin.

Rhett threw himself backwards and winced as the self-driving bolt hammered into the deck plating right between his legs. Had he been a moment too slow or just a few inches too short in his movement, the trooper would have been impaled just below the navel and pinned to the deck. Rhett's combat rifle barked several times, the sound muffled by the harsh environment, and the smiler jerked wildly as the bullets pierced suit and flesh.

"Vultures, sound off!" shouted Rhett through the comm-bead, suddenly realizing that he'd heard no radio chatter in some time, likely the result of how fearful and fiercely focused the fighting had been. "I'm at the command hatch, rally on me!"

As the rest of the bounty scrappers made themselves heard, Rhett activated a red strobe light that was mounted on his waist. Moments later Dante and Drago appeared in the doorway and took up overwatch positions as Quinn and the remaining cutters moved as a group into the mess hall. It looked to Rhett as if nobody else was worse for the wear, which was a miracle considering the hellish fighting they'd just encountered.

"Doak, you and Sparks are up, get me a pressure seal on this hatch and get us inside on the quick," growled Rhett as he swatted an empty food tray that was floating near his face. "Dante, what did we just get through here? I confirm six kills between myself and the cutters."

"We accounted for nine here, along with yours and the four from engineering, that's seventeen, minimum," responded Dante before

adding, “We had two unconfirmed, likely only wounded, from Vader’s skirmish earlier, though either of those could be corpses here.”

“Manifest puts the crew roster at ninety-seven individuals,” came the voice of Captain Estrada, as if anticipating Rhett’s line of questioning. “Based on equipment specs and ship configuration there would have only been three designated arms men with sidearms and access to the weapons locker, though in case of hostile boarders the armory was stocked with a dozen more shotguns. Based on what you have encountered so far, I would obviously advise caution, though I think you’ve seen the worst of it as far as traditionally armed opponents.”

Rhett shook his head and kept his rifle at the ready, choosing to keep his mouth shut rather than remind Estrada about the combat effectiveness of power drills and energy beams. Doak and Sparks got busy setting up the pressure seal, which was a standard item in the cutter’s scrap kit.

Doak carried a pressure seal that was folded into a container roughly the size of a military rucksack. Rhett watched as the cutters carefully unfolded the device and spread it across the bloodstained hatch. The trooper could see from the latch and still active lockpad that the deck was both sealed and pressurized. Doak and Sparks held the seal up over the hatch, which reminded Rhett, for a moment, of an inflatable life raft. Doak depressed the activator on the side of the seal and in seconds the pressurized foam inside the veins of the device expanded to create a plastic faux hatch over the actual metal one, which would allow the team to open the hatch, rush in, and close it again without losing too much of whatever meager cabin pressure and life support remained. It was a single use device, so if the team had to make a hasty exit they’d depressurize the deck most likely, as the seal would have lost most of its structural integrity. Then again, bounty scrappers usually vented any ship they encountered anyway.

“Seal is good, Calibos,” announced Doak after the man checked a small keypad that was the only non-inflatable part of the device.

“Alright, folks, we don’t know what’s waiting for us in there, but we do know it won’t be friendly,” said Rhett.

“Can’t be any worse than what’s out here,” observed Quinn with a voice more upbeat than seemed appropriate compared to their grim surroundings. “Somebody locked themselves away from all this.”

Rhett gave the signal and Doak opened the faux hatch to allow the team to pack themselves into the small space. Once he’d closed it behind them the cutter gave Quinn the thumbs up, and then the engineer slid a small tool from her diagnostic kit into the lockpad of the actual hatch. The young woman’s face was aglow from the light of her wrist mounted screen for a few seconds before she smiled wide,

pleased with herself about how swiftly she'd been able to hack the lock's security. Quinn gave Rhett a thumb's up and the trooper squared his shoulders to prepare himself.

"Open it up," Rhett said in a low voice, and in response Quinn hit a button on the lockpad.

The hatch slid open quickly and a gentle rush of air swept over the team as the atmosphere of the command deck expanded to fill the faux hatch. Dante and Rhett plunged into the compartment head with their guns at the ready, followed by Drago, and then the cutters. Quinn was the last in, and she swiftly closed the hatch behind them. The team fanned out and immediately Rhett took notice of the fact that the emergency track lighting was still active, bathing the room in an off-white indirect light. He could see that they were in an officer's rec room, though it had seen better days, as much of the casual décor had been stripped away and old blood was splattered across the walls and floor in a few places.

"Calibos, we have breathable atmo in here," said Quinn as the group secured the room.

"Twenty-seven bounties and not once has that happened," said Sparks, holding her pistol at the ready while she followed the others across the room. "Not to mention those bodies in the aft section, crucified against the ship's engine."

"It's a day of firsts all right," retorted Rhett as he kept his weapon pointed at the open doorway that lead towards the bridge. "Twenty-seven bounties and not once have we had to fight the original crew either."

Rhett and Dante moved through the corridor together, as the trooper checked ahead of them for possible traps or duct work that might allow the enemy to ambush them. Once he reached the bridge, the trooper realized he would have actually preferred a firefight to what greeted him there.

The corridor ended at a set of platforms, one that lead upwards and another that led down, creating two small levels inside a single large chamber that had several viewports and defunct observation screens. The bridge was situated just above the pilot's deck, so that the captain and officers could look down into the pilot's work area, creating a physical reminder of the captain's position of authority while also giving him or her a clear view of all bridge staff.

"Drago, Sparks, and Doak take the pilot's deck, the rest on me," ordered Rhett before adjusting his rifle and stepping up the sloping deck plating that lead above.

Rhett crested the top of the slope and peered at the command deck through the iron sights of his compact rifle. He sucked in his breath as his eyes took in the sight of a person in a void suit slumped

over in the captain's chair. The only reason the body had not floated from the chair was the safety belt slung across the person's chest. A shotgun was tethered to the chair, though it drifted out of easy reach, as if the person had not bothered to pull it towards them in response to the Vultures penetrating the sealed off part of the ship.

"Calibos, switch to theta frequency, channel forty-seven," ordered Captain Estrada suddenly. "Mons is picking up a short-range repeater signal, not connected to ship's power so it's on a cell."

Without hesitation, Rhett keyed his comm-bead over to the channel, carefully picking his way towards the captain's char.

"All hands lost," said a thin voice through the comm-bead. "No escape. On the drift. Nobody left to save."

The same message kept repeating over and over in Rhett's bead, and now that he knew he was looking for something not connected to the ship's systems it was easy to identify the black box set haphazardly against the command deck. It was an emergency model, but so far out of date it had to be a collector's item owned by a crew member, no way a theta frequency box would be part of standard ship kit on a modern vessel. Rhett found himself making a note to talk with Bella Mons, the ship's tech officer, about making theta sweeps part of their standard operating procedure. Not that the bounty scrappers would have done anything differently, but at least they would have known there was something foul aboard the AG16 before putting boots on the hull.

Rhett and Dante exchanged a concerned look and then moved to flank the person in the chair.

The person suddenly exploded into action, pulling the shotgun into waiting hands and turning the chair to face the vultures who approached. Without hesitation, Dante put a round through the person's mid-section, then a second through the action of the shotgun itself, just in time to cause the weapon to backfire as the person squeezed the trigger. When the person in the void suit recoiled in pain the voice on the other end of channel forty-seven screamed, and Rhett realized he was listening to the person in the chair.

"Dante, stand down!" shouted Rhett. To the vulture's credit, he pulled his finger from the trigger just before firing a third round.

Rhett rushed over to the person in the void suit and assessed their wound, seeing that Dante's shot went cleanly through the thin material and back out the other side of the chair.

The person in the suit was a man who looked middle aged, though he was haggard from six months of whatever nightmare fate had befallen this doomed ship, and looked to have been on death's door regardless of the bullet wound. The man did not seem to share

the same white and green ergot growths on his face, though from the look of his wide eyes he had certainly lost his mind anyway.

"All hands are lost," the man spoke emphatically as he gripped Rhett's arm weakly, though he winced from the pain as Rhett moved him slightly to check the man's chemical mix on the tanks that fed the void suit. "No escape. On the drift. Nobody left to save."

The man tried to speak again, but this time he was interrupted by a fit of coughing that ended in him spitting up enough blood to cover the bottom of his faceplate. The man's body, now that he was close enough Rhett could see, was somewhat wasted away from lack of fluids and nutrition, finally gave up.

"All hands are lost," the man gasped before slumping over once again in the chair.

Rhett stood back up and peered over the edge of the command deck to see that the other part of his team had secured the pilot's deck without incident. He could see several spent heat lamps and dozens of chemical heat pouches, and surmised that these and the man in the suit were the heat sources picked up by Vulture Six on the long-range sensors. Judging from the sheer volume of discarded ration packets, breathing tanks, and filled waste sleeves floating throughout the sizeable deck, Rhett began to understand how this man had survived for six months out here.

"AG16 bridge secured," said Rhett in a haunted voice, "Calibos out."

5. RAVAGERS

Despite the fact that his port had been properly lubricated and was kept pristine with routine cleanings, Sokol still winced as the neuro-link slid into the base of his skull. The grim-faced man had intentionally cranked the nerve dampeners on his bio-feedback loop down to their minimum functional setting. He wanted to feel as much of the machine as he possibly could, and to do so meant he had to endure the pain of that heightened awareness, for no human body was ever meant to withstand the sheer amount of neural input data generated by the Coyote class mech-warrior, or any other mech for that matter.

The mech's name was Ogre One, and for Sokol Targe, being as intimate as he could be with the holy war machine was the greatest sensation a man could hope for in this short and brutish existence.

Except, of course, the intoxicating rush of using that same war machine to lay waste, the single purpose for which it was built.

Sokol found that when he was part of Ogre One, the world became a profoundly simple place, freed from the bondage of currency, corporation, or creed. In those moments of blistering warfare, Sokol felt as if he and Ogre were one entity, a pure being made of an amalgamation of meat and metal. That feeling was always gone again when he disconnected from the mech, and though many pilots throughout corporate space described similar experiences, Sokol's bond felt, to him at least, much deeper. Every second he was not within the cold metal womb he felt naked, small, and so very powerless.

That truth would have come as a surprise to most, as Sokol himself was a large man, especially for a mech pilot. He had grown up on one of the dozens of agri-worlds that fed the perpetually compounding population of Helion Corporation, and all the whole food and fresh air had given young Sokol a chance to grow up healthy and strong. Sokol thought back to his childhood as the mech's systems booted up and began to meld with his own awareness of the various inner and outer workings of the war machine.

He had come a long way from the wheat and soy farms that his family, and countless others, had dutifully tended for the socialist masters of Helion. It had been a good life, he reflected grimly, before the harsh truth of the world had made itself all too apparent.

Sokol was young and adventurous and sought to experience life away from the farm, to see what the vast empire of Helion had to offer a dutiful citizen. His parents had not attempted to stop him, apparently convinced that upon his first glimpse of the greater

corporate world, Sokol would return with all haste.

Unlike other corporate societies, the people of Helion were free to move about the various planets held by the empire, so long as their mobility papers were stamped approved and they had the funds to afford transport and expenses.

What factors made one person eligible for mobility and another ineligible was something of a mystery to the average citizen, though for most everyone there were still a great many places they were allowed to travel, and people accepted whatever access was granted with dutiful and quiet grace.

Sokol's mother, however, was barred from receiving a mobility pass off world, due to several poor decisions she'd made in her youth. She had been an environmental activist, something only moderately tolerated in Helion society. She and several dozen of her comrades had taken things a step too far. They had assembled, as a single group, on the steps of the planetary governor's capital building, demanding a cessation to the wetlands devastation being caused by a rapid increase in required soy output. That increase had caused many thousands of acres of wetlands on their home planet of Yurimax to be drained and converted into production fields, causing the extinction of several wild species of birds, fish, and reptiles.

It wasn't so much that their concerns had fallen on deaf ears, quite the contrary, as the governor himself had halted the expansion after receiving their impact study. He was too late to save most of the wild species, though some had managed to linger for decades after, before dying off anyway due to their irreversibly damaged eco-system.

The real infraction of the protestors was assembling in a non-leisure group larger than five people, which was unlawful assembly according to Helion corporate law.

Activists had been disallowed from assembly for centuries, and were expected to keep their groups small, remain in sanctioned protest zones that were comfortably arranged away from the capital buildings and business districts. The system seemed to have worked fine until that day, and though Sokol's mother was spared from a lengthy prison sentence due to the peaceful nature of their demonstration, her mobility was restricted. Sadly, that had meant that the family itself also had some restrictions on their mobility, though more so Sokol's father, as the children were given mobility grants on a probationary basis.

Sokol felt Ogre's grindcore ignite, and soon power thrummed through the entire machine. Such fools they had been, thought Sokol as he raised Ogre's left arm, which had a massive ripsaw attachment on the underside of the forearm.

The bulk of the arm was comprised of a mounted autocannon

with several armored ammo drums set into a cycler. Sokol thought of his parents, who, when faced with the crushing reality of Helion's total control over their lives and their very thoughts, had retreated into the quiet life of farmers. Their peace was a lie, thought Sokol, gazing upon his right arm, which was a mag-cannon, replete with stabilizing fins splayed out from the jointed elbow section. The world beyond Helion's oppressive demand for peace, community, and equality, was a brutal one indeed.

Out here, on the ragged edge between the corporate world and necrospace, a man could find true freedom. Sokol turned his head, and Ogre's cockpit turned as well, so that the pilot could look upon the other four mech-warriors who were also powering up and preparing for the assault.

There was camaraderie to be found here, and so long as the weak submitted to the strong, there could be a kind of community too. No bureaucrat would ever stamp a mobility pass for Sokol Targe again, he snarled to himself inside his own mind, and there was no force in the universe that could stop him from going where he wanted to go, thinking what he wanted to think, or taking what he wanted to take.

"Ogre One," came the voice of Lelani Ursa, the deck chief aboard the starship *Fatalis*, and as his comm-bead chimed, Sokol could see that the other mechs were online and fully powered. "I have Swift Hammer, Thunder Walks, and Night Witch online and ready for action."

"Locking positions!" bellowed Sokol as the onboard computer registered his retinal commands with the head's up display in his cockpit, following his orders to activate the magnetic clamps that would hold his mech steady during the descent.

Sokol, like most other mech pilots, believed that the heads-up display and onboard computers were not the full extent of the mech's ability to interpret the desires of the pilot's will. There had to be something else, some whole that was greater than the sum of its parts, that allowed the truly gifted mech pilots to work with their war machines as if they were a single mind in two bodies.

Sokol used to think that, though after his first combat mission with the now dead mech, Tank Bane, he had come to believe that it was correct to think of it as two minds sharing two bodies. Sick of farming, he had endeavored to join the Helion armed forces, finding himself mentally and physically well suited to the lifestyle. He had been on a training mission, his first solo operation, out of Frost Base on a classified planet that served as one of Helion's most prized mech bases.

The entire operation had turned into a nightmare.

Tank Bane had been a Tyrant class mech, easily standing tall enough to sweep its arm through the third floor of a standard building. Apparently, a group of seditionists had infiltrated the base and arranged for a rookie pilot to take the mech out on a training mission.

The seditionists were hoping to seize the mech and use it to destroy as much of Frost Base as they could. From what he'd read in the after-action reports, those that weren't deemed classified by the intelligence and culture officers, the seditionists were attempting to show the rest of corporate space that the might of the Helion army was a lie. Sokol had known by then, after having served for several years in the Helion military, the particular brand of white-washed culture propaganda.

While Helion might be the most egalitarian corporate entity in the universe, offering equal opportunity to its common citizens from one end of the empire to the other, Sokol knew that the corporate elites maintained a hard glass ceiling above those masses.

Sokol never found out exactly what the seditionists had hoped to accomplish. What he did know, was that when he and Tank Bane came under attack by several assault skiffs and two aerial gun drones, the mech reacted to the assault before he had even become fully aware it was happening at all. It felt as if the machine had borrowed the young man's awareness, and before he knew what he was doing, Tank Bane had repelled the enemy assault with devastating effectiveness. Despite the praise heaped upon him by the tech crews and some of the other pilots, he could not help but observe that even in those moments of heated battle his reactions felt slow, and his connection to the machine seemed shallow compared to what he knew it could be.

That had been a long time ago, before he had renounced his Helion citizenship without declaring for another corporation, the very act of which was illegal and earned his name a place on the Red List, and joined the Fiat Lux ravager commune.

All of which had led Sokol to this backwater world, which was really just a planetoid so small it was only one rating above a satellite body. It didn't even have a name, just atmosphere and a number, PM2258, which marked it as belonging to the corporation known as Praxis Mundi. It was thought of as a small corporation by most, though the sheer expanse of mapped space it occupied was misunderstood at best and unknown at worst. As the company's chief business venture was the shipment of cargo, Praxis Mundi had an abundance of corporate allies and its few enemies were upstart shipping groups on an, as yet, minuscule scale.

Planetoids like PM2258 were claimed by Praxis Mundi, either by

commerce or combat, and used as rest-refit waypoints and distribution hubs for the corporation's vast shipping network. While most of their known sites were large and on well-traveled courses between and in star systems, most of them operating within corporate space were held by one company or another and maintained via hefty land leases. There was a multitude of backwater stations like PM2258. In fact, most of Praxis Mundi's success was owed to these 'dark' stations, as they were positioned in necrospace, either in uncharted areas or abandoned quadrants where nobody would notice the intrusion.

Such facilities were essentially private starports, and though they did maintain military capabilities for the purpose of self-defense, these places were outfitted for low grade threats.

Sokol thought of the short mission briefing he and the others had received aboard *Fatalis*, and mused that from what intel had been gathered, the facility was at least formidable enough to repel space pirates and to drive off Red List squatters. This would not be an easy kill by any means, though it wasn't as if they were about to assault a real fortress. Cor-sec may yet prove worthy opponents, thought Sokol as he flexed his fingers, relishing in the sight of the articulated digits of the mech following his movements, he longed for a real fight.

The Coyote class mechs were the only models, at least that Sokol had seen, equipped with fully articulated hands, each tipped with titanium claws, meant to allow the mechs to climb surfaces stout enough to support their weight. Sokol's adrenaline surged as he considered that Ogre One and Night Witch both were more prone to use them in close quarters combat, an unorthodox use of mech-warriors, though a common tactic amongst the killers who called the starship *Fatalis* home.

Ogre One's grindcore sparked with what Sokol chose to believe was anticipation for the hunt to come, and he snapped his attention back to the moment at hand.

Lelani's crews had retreated from the assault deck and he could feel the rumble of the ship's hull as the *Fatalis* performed rapid planetfall. Upon entering the system, *Fatalis* scanners had picked up the presence of a Praxis Mundi cor-sec frigate, whose appearance ran counter to the ship scheduling intelligence that had been purchased at a high price, which had made a gentle planetfall without noticing the *Fatalis* as the warship skulked on the shadow side of the small world.

The captain of the *Fatalis*, Kochi the Deathless, as he was called, had determined that the warship would break atmosphere and engage the frigate while the mech squad shattered the facility, and a swarm party of armed crew members would move up to support the war machines.

Sokol had never himself witnessed such a wild piece of piloting, though he knew that only a small percentage of commanders and flight staff would attempt such a thing. To break atmosphere at such speeds would superheat the ship and rattle its very bones, putting the vessel's engineering and construction to the greatest of tests, even when the pilot's angle of descent was perfect. However, should the ship hold together and achieve flight normalcy, then the very presence of the starship was a game changer, as it could bring its weapons to bear upon targets without any of the usual complications and potency reductions of firing from orbit.

The ship suddenly started to buck and shake from what felt like projectile impacts. Apparently, the corporate scum planetside had finally woken up to the fact that a Red List warship had entered their airspace.

Never was there a battle so pure as the one waged for survival. As a Red List community, their freedom was a desperate sort, fueled by theft and piracy in an unending struggle to last just one more cycle. Fiat Lux had been living lean for nearly six months as their rangers had been scouring necrospace for a worthwhile target. There were mouths to feed, with precious little time to make a good kill and harvest a fresh bounty.

"Eight flak batteries and four turbo-lasers on the compound, looks like they weren't expecting anything heavier than conventional air support, and the frigate is a solid three minutes out," reported Lelani. The mech squad could hear the voice of Morgan growling from inside Night Witch as Lelani added, "Swarm barges away. Planetfall in twenty seconds. War machines, fangs out!"

"I am the Hammer that strikes Unrelenting!" shouted Gregory Schnect from the cockpit of Swift Hammer, a Titan class mech that stood several meters taller than Sokol in his machine, making the Coyote class machine look more like an exoskeleton than a mech by comparison, as he chambered and primed high velocity thud rounds in the cannons mounted on both his arms and shoulders.

"I am the Beast that stalks the Fields!" answered Sokol before he revved his ripsaw and squared his shoulders, the beat of his heart and the grind of his mech combining to breach the barrier in his psyche between man and machine while he braced for eject.

"I am the Storm that shatters the Walls!" bellowed Angron from within Thunder Walks, the re-furbished Titan class mech that had seen combat in a dozen wars before the Fiat Lux reavers had stolen it, though any who witnessed the mech in action would swear that the man named Angron had been born in its metal womb.

"I am the Darkness that destroys all Hope," whispered Morgan, while the Night Witch, with its twin plasma lances, stood perfectly

still as the pilot deftly adjusted the mech's stance in time with the impacts and shifts in the ship's course.

"Good hunting," intoned Lelani as she keyed the quick release hatch and activated an ejection sequence that hurled the four mechs forward even as the ship's hard banking maneuver dumped them out right above the complex.

6. THE GOOD KILL

Sokol's heart pounded in his chest as Ogre One hit the open sky, and the pilot activated all his scanners at once to survey the battlescape as his machine plummeted downwards.

A warship the size of *Fatalis* entering the atmosphere of a larger world would not have done much more than cause a few minor electrical storms if anything at all. However, PM2258 was small enough that the sudden and violent presence of *Fatalis* breaking atmo had caused tremendous havoc. That much mass and energy entering the delicate planetary eco-system threw the weather into a fury. Electrical storms raged all around him as Sokol fell towards the fortress through sheets of rain and hail. The gun emplacements down below were struggling to compensate for the sudden and dramatic change in the weather, though judging from the incoming fire streaking past him, they had been able to ground their weapons to prevent damage from the electrical chaos.

Below him the complex waited, and now that he could get a more unfiltered look at it with his own instruments he was happy to see that it was a hard target indeed. It was a rectangular fortress with wide sloping walls and dirt berms all around it. Most of the complex had the look of a bunker the various gun emplacements on the outer wall were all connected by open passageways. Sokol surmised that they made for the swift transport of the guns, supply runs, and troop movements. This fortress would have been nigh impregnable to the average space pirate band. Attackers would have to engage in an air-to-ground battle with the guns and move troops over land in a direct assault, both of which would be costly. The walls were pre-fab concrete, which was to be expected, though he could tell by the color that the Praxis builders had coated the surface in impact enamel, a substance that would rob most incoming fire of its kinetic energy. So they wouldn't be able to shoot their way in, thought Sokol as a smile spread across his face, that just meant they'd have to fight their way inside while under fire no matter where they landed, a prospect he relished.

The ravagers of Fiat Lux were predators, and Captain Kochi took that metaphor seriously. In the few wilderness areas that remained in known space the predators of the natural world were not warriors, and did not seek conflict with equals. Better to run down something weaker than oneself than do battle with an equal adversary. When the captain was presented with targets by the rangers it was his custom to seek the weakest target that would yield the most abundant spoils. It was no different for the multitudes of space pirates that shared the

black with Fiat Lux. What set the ravagers apart was their war grade hardware and military discipline, which enabled the hunters aboard the starship *Fatalis* to seize prizes far beyond the ability of common bandits.

Red Listers were thought of by corporate society as desperate folk, castoffs who eked out their meager existence wandering the stars in rag-tag clusters of junk ships or squatting on abandoned property in the hopes that it stayed forgotten. Even space pirates, menacing as they might seem to those who only knew them from stories, were little more than the afore mentioned castoffs who happened to have a few guns and a slightly faster ship. Fiat Lux was something different, a community that has gained notoriety in several sectors for their hardware, their discipline, and their savagery.

We are at war with civilization, chanted Sokol inside his helmet, the ravager mantra keeping him focused as he used some of the onboard booster modules to enable him to duck out of the way of an incoming salvo from one of the turbo-lasers.

Our people are the Bottom Line, continued the pilot as he extended his right arm and tucked in the mech's legs to help the stabilizer fins steady the mag-cannon for target lock.

"Death to the false idols of currency," growled Sokol, this time into his headset, so that the other falling mechs could hear him, as he fired his mag-cannon.

The heavy rounds roared out of the barrel of Sokol's mounted weapon and streaked down towards the turbo-laser emplacement below. As the distance between the mech and its target shrank by the second, Sokol could see the explosive rounds rip through the flimsy armor of the large gun. As the hardened shell of the rounds was stripped away by the various impacts, the explosive core of each one detonated with the force of a grenade. The four cor-sec troopers that had been crewing the gun were sent sprawling, at least two of them in pieces.

"Meat for the tribe," answered Morgan as Night Witch appeared on Sokol's far left flank and opened up with her autocannon, pulping the survivors and another trooper, perhaps a medic, who had appeared to be rushing to their aide.

Sokol activated his boosters and pointed them upwards, causing the war machine's descent to slow tremendously and suddenly, which allowed the pilot to land with something approaching grace. Ogre One slammed into the inclined wall just behind the grisly remains of the turbo-laser and its crew. The mech's claws and the pitons on its feet bit through the enamel and into the concrete as the joints of the machine compensated for the impact. In the blink of an eye, Ogre One launched itself up over the battlement and began sprinting across the

open passageway where the would-be rescuer had emerged.

As Sokol entered the passageway, which was wide enough to contain the war machine but afforded him little in the way of mobility, several cor-sec troopers began to fire at him. Small arms fire rang off the armored body of Ogre One and Sokol whipped his head around to see that troopers had appeared on both sides of him, others having approached from the opposite passage. Their weapons were unlikely to penetrate Ogre's thick hide, however enough concentrated fire would damage his gun systems and possibly his joints. The cor-sec troopers lost no time in attempting to do just that, and Sokol begrudgingly had to acknowledge their tenacity.

The reputation of *Fatalis* and its cadre of war machines must have preceded them, Sokol reflected as he turned his auto-cannon on the troopers in the passage ahead of him, riddling two of them full of holes and forcing a third to duck into a side passage for cover.

As the bloody fame of Fiat Lux spread from sector to sector it seemed that the prey grew ever more relentless in their self-defense. The pilot extended his mag-cannon and took a precious additional moment to line up his shot perfectly before firing. For a bunch of low rent cor-sec troopers to try a stand up fight with a mech implied that there were prices on the heads of the ravagers, larger perhaps than they had been since the last good kill, large enough that men with little hope of victory went on the offense against a superior foe.

Sokol fired the mag-cannon, having given his targeting system time to acquire all four hostiles, and his patience was rewarded. The two mag rounds tore through the riot grade body armor worn by the pair of cor-sec troopers who were firing from a kneeling position. One round, that had gone through a man's chest, exploded upon impact with the body armor of the cor-sec trooper behind the first. The second round went through a man's neck, losing little of its outer shell in the process, and then tore off the leg of the trooper behind before exploding upon impact with the passage wall.

The pilot did not revel overlong in his swift victory, as his instincts, combined with Ogre's sensor array, took note that the flak battery at the end of the passageway ahead of him had turned its quad-barrels away from the *Fatalis* and towards him. The Coyote class mech bunched its legs beneath it and leapt upwards just as the flak battery gunner squeezed the triggers.

Sokol lashed out with his left hand and sank his claws into the top of the wall and used his momentum from the jump to swing the mech's legs up and over the battlements. His other clawed hand bit into the concrete to steady him as he kept his momentum going and twisted the machine's torso hard, keeping his legs moving. The maneuver resulted in him being able to land Ogre One in a crouched

position atop the battlements, using the thickness of the wall as a perch, effective, if precarious. He was out in the open, he knew that, but at least he wasn't in the passageway, which was being scoured by anti-air fragmentation rounds that would have chewed apart the vital systems of his mech.

Sokol rose from his crouch and rushed across the top of the battlement, sensing other guns being trained on him, even if he could not tell from where. It was a sizeable fortress, and he was rushing across the top of the wall out in the open. He was not surprised when gunfire began to spatter the wall at his feet and zip past his careening machine. He had been Ogre One's pilot for several years now, yet still he marveled at the functional magnificence of it.

Many corporations in the universe had mech warrior programs, even if the majority of them were modest at best, and usually the machines were used for crowd control or ceremonial duty. Helion's mech program, however, was something more advanced. Not just by way of technological prowess, but the amount of time and resources placed into it. While Grotto might raise a penal legion and march them into the enemy's guns for a fraction of the cost, there was a sense of corporate pride that swelled in the breast of every Helion battle trooper when one of their mech warriors strode into war.

He might have a festering hatred for his former corporation, thought Sokol as he brought his mag-cannon up and began to spit rounds into the flak-battery, but the mechs built by Helion were without peer.

Secondary explosions blasted apart the flak-battery and for a moment turned the gun emplacement into an inferno of detonating fragmentation rounds. Sokol looked down and saw a group of cor-sec troopers struggling to bring around a grav-mounted auto-cannon, seemingly to put themselves and the gun between the mechs and what appeared to be a reinforced gate that presumably led into the bunker style complex.

Sokol leapt off the wall and began sliding down the inclined outer wall in a shower of stripped enamel. With his right claw dragging furrows through the concrete to slow and steady his descent, Sokol raised his left arm and cut loose with his own auto-cannon. The cor-sec troopers managed to activate the grav-mount on the weapon before the salvo of rounds hit them and two men managed to heave it out of the way. Sokol's attack shredded the body of one trooper who moved too slow, and the mech moved to compensate.

The cor-sec troopers were fighting for their lives, it was well known that Fiat Lux ravagers took no prisoners, and the men were fighting in top form out of pure desperation. Sokol had to give them that, and though it might frustrate the likes of Captain Kochi to

encounter more of a fight than a clean takedown, the pilot himself was thrilled with the difficulties of the day. The cor-sec gunners did not disappoint him and they returned fire with the auto-cannon.

A steady stream of deadly rounds raced towards Ogre One, though Sokol accurately judged their fire trajectory and got out of the way. He pushed the Coyote class mech to the edges of its capacity for agility as he pumped the legs and used both claws to half crawl and half fall away from the incoming. He dared not return fire till he was on flat ground, as the gunners tracked him almost as swiftly as he moved. When he finally met the ground, Sokol gathered his legs underneath him and pushed off with every ounce of juice Ogre would give him, knowing that if he was even one second too slow the gunner would catch up with him.

As Sokol launched himself he used his boosters to rapidly rotate his alignment. He slammed into the hard scrabble that passed for the ground on this little planet his auto-cannon spitting death at his enemies.

The low angle of the weapon caused dozens of rounds to slice through the legs of three cor-sec troopers, causing them to fall forwards or backwards into yet more rounds. The gunner, to his credit, ignored the fact that his left leg was missing at the knee and used the gun to support himself. Sokol's eyes widened as the auto-cannon swiveled to put his mech square in its sights.

Two burning projectiles converged on the gunner and his weapon, slagging everything in an instant, making it appear to the naked eye as an explosion. The ground shook as Night Witch landed between Sokol and the ruined heap of meat and metal that had been about to seal his fate. The Night Witch said nothing, simply rising to a standing position and unleashing plasma fury against the reinforced gate.

Sokol was deeply attracted to Morgan, though if he was honest it was Night Witch and the way she piloted the war machine that truly ignited his passions. The woman inside the machine had a compact physique and the sort of plain face a man could easily overlook in a crowd of more striking beauties, and yet when she became Night Witch there was nothing more alluring to him. Angron shared Sokol's passion for the woman, which had led to multiple confrontations before Morgan made it clear that she intended to have them both. She was fierce, that one, thought Sokol as he urged his own mech back to its feet. Morgan had been born and raised in the commune, and disinclined to yield to the ideas and customs from the corporate world. A self-taught mech pilot and Red List ravager through to her grindcore.

Ogre's sensor array picked up the staccato of Swift Hammer's thud guns and as Night Witch burned away at the gate, Sokol started

running around the wide end of the bunker's base. Even over the storm, Sokol could hear Thunder Walks pounding at the other gun emplacements, and assumed that the large mech was somewhere on the outer wall, taking out key targets and keeping cor-sec response teams at bay. The swarm barges would be circling the fortress by now and ready to converge once the flares were sent up.

The lack of radio chatter on the part of the ravagers was something of a pirate tactic, one that Sokol felt was rather effective. Most of the military forces engaged in combat had encryption and anti-encryption programs running at all times, which meant that about half the time one side could hear the traffic of the other. Pirates couldn't afford that kind of tech, so developed what amounted to memorized tactical responses, in addition to drilling the plan over and over. The ravagers of *Fatalis* had plenty of high end hardware, though cared little to do the encryption dance. Instead, Captain Kochi insisted that all swarmers and mech warriors do battle with their headsets engaged, so that if anyone on the other side happened to be monitoring radio traffic all they would hear would be the sounds of the battle they were already losing. It was as devious as it was brilliant, and Sokol smiled wickedly as he imagined what the sound of Angron's Titan level mag-cannons was doing to the morale of the cor-sec defenders.

While he pushed Ogre through the sleeting rain and churning mud of the courtyard perimeter, the deep purple and green flashes of ship-to-ship combat lit up the sky seconds before the near deafening booms of the massive warship batteries reached his ears. The *Fatalis* was a Fenrir Industries warship, built to look and function like the fast attack gunships that most other corporations used, only twice the size. While Captain Kochi would not dare pit the *Fatalis* against anything resembling a fellow warship, facing off against a cor-sec security frigate was within tolerable risk parameters. It was one of Kochi's many wisdoms, and Sokol imagined what the interior atmospheric battle looked like right now, that he thought like a pirate but fought like a soldier.

As he rounded the edge of the complex he could see that Swift Hammer had landed just behind the battlements and had been punishing the cor-sec defenders with his specialized anti-infantry armaments. The sheer number of rounds his weapon was capable of hurling into the enemy was tremendous, and as Sokol surveyed the scene before him it was clear that Swift Hammer's attack had been devastating. Strewn about the courtyard were the bodies of pulverized cor-sec troopers and two lite assault skiffs. As Sokol watched, Gregory turned Swift Hammer in the direction of what appeared to be the primary loading docks.

The Titan class mech did not have nearly the same articulation that the Coyote class did, and so Swift Hammer's movements were ponderous and clumsy compared to what Ogre One was capable of. However, what Titan class mechs lost in agility they made up for in armor and firepower, as evidenced by how Swift Hammer simply shrugged off the counter attack by another grav-mounted auto-cannon crew that appeared from inside the small garrison building set into the outer wall. A fusillade of bullets that would have rendered Ogre One useless, if not destroyed it outright, simply pinged off of Swift Hammer's thick hide.

Sokol strode forward and activated his targeting systems as Swift Hammer blasted apart another skiff that was attempting to exit the loading dock. The Titan class mech used sustained fire to disable the doorway mechanisms and tear apart much of the gate in the process. Sokol fired his mag-cannon several times and wiped out the cor-sec gunners as they were reloading their weapon, not that it would have helped them against the Titan.

Two bright yellow flares suddenly soared into the chaotic night sky, making Sokol aware that it was day cycle for the crew of the *Fatalis*, though here on PM2258 it was just approaching midnight. Night Witch must have finally penetrated the gate, as the flares were her color, signaling to the pilots of the swarm barges that she had breached the fortress.

In seconds, the unique sound of the barges filled the sky and the transport craft appeared over the edges of the complex walls. No sooner had they crossed the threshold than the hatches on the barges blew open and ravager infantry began pouring out from within. Each of the ravagers was armed and armored according to his or her individual preference, and it gave them a discordantly menacing appearance on the battlefield.

Sokol pushed Ogre One into a sprint and reached the loading hangar ahead of the stormers. He used his powerful claws to tear the door the rest of the way open and then swept his targeting systems through the interior. He dared not fire indiscriminately for fear of damaging the very spoils they were here to raid for, though he did manage to draw the fire of several cor-sec defenders. As he'd hoped there were several of them attempting to hold the hangar. In the tight confines of the chamber he would not be able to use his mounted weapons.

The mech warrior flexed his claws and smiled, it was time to bring this fight in close.

Sometime later Ogre One emerged from the hangar bay, the stormers having infiltrated and quickly seized the complex. Sokol would have kept going, but the mech was simply too large to move

about the interior beyond the hangar bay, though he had gotten what he'd come for. Ogre One's dusty yellow armor was splattered in blood and the mech's claws were dripping with gore. In the end it had been the sight of the Coyote class mech tearing men apart in close quarters melee combat that had finally broken the will of the defenders.

Sokol heard a familiar grindcore behind him and turned to see Morgan and Night Witch coming around the far side of the complex, covered in a similarly vast quantity of carnage.

A good kill indeed.

7. ANDROMEDA

Rhett kept his eyes closed as he stood under the shower head, ignoring the consumption warnings chiming through the control panel gently reminding him that he'd exceeded his water ration and was racking up premium charges.

Water was only marginally more precious than breathable air out here in the black and the municipal authorities on the massive space station maintained a strict administration when it came to such resources. If someone was docking with an expired set of licenses or ended up in the brig after a bar fight, those were negotiable offenses. Wasting water and skipping on the bill meant a no trial trip out of the airlock if Port Authority caught up with the offender.

The bounty scrapper knew that soon his fee for the water was going to exceed what he'd paid for the room, the girl, and the drinks. His throat had the dull ache of too much mescal, and the hot water was making him keenly aware of the multitude of tiny abrasions on his body due to the ill-fitting but affordable patchwork armor he often wore. It seemed that just as he was getting comfortable in one suit the *Vulture* would come across a hostile salvage and he would have to reconfigure it to adjust for battle damage and replacement parts.

Rhett kept his eyes closed and turned his face towards the shower head, letting the gentle spray cascade over his face as he did his best to ignore the chiming control panel and wash away the thoughts that continued to rob him of his peace.

All hands are lost.

The AG16 had been a hard bounty, even for such a seasoned crew as those aboard the *Vulture Six*. The payday had been significant, one of the largest they'd pulled in years, but it had cost them plenty. The fuel and repairs were part of the *Vulture*'s established consumables budget, but the loss of Vader had been tough. The cutter had been on the crew since Rhett's first day, and though he didn't know much about the man it seemed like he was okay enough. People dying on salvage ops was common, whether they were hostile or not, and on a long enough timeline even the best bounty scrappers in the business often met their end on the job. It was the idea of dying on a ship like that, in a nightmare tomb tumbling through space, that bothered the team. Not that anyone aboard the *Vulture* was overly superstitious, but the idea of Vader being another ghost wandering that ship make Rhett sick to his stomach.

No escape.

Once the bridge was secured Quinn made good on her wage and got the engine spinning, which was no small feat considering that

Doak and Sparks had to haul several cables across the outside of the hull and thread them back through the ship into the engine chamber. Andromeda Station was the *Vulture*'s home berth, and in addition to being the only trading post in the sector, Andromeda sported an Aegis franchised chop yard.

They had swept the rest of the ship, going from room to room, ready to blast anything that moved, to discover, thankfully, that they'd already killed everything aboard. Quinn continued her analysis, Bella cross referenced what she could through the Aegis data network, and between them they painted a picture of what became the official report.

At some point during their travels the AG16's agri cargo was contaminated by an ergot bloom. Given the radically unpredictable mixture of genetically modified organisms the only logical explanation was that somehow the ergot, or a mutated and especially devastating version of it, got into the atmosphere of the ship. In ancient times ergot poisoning, which caused hallucinations in addition to slowly rotting the body away in a gangrenous fashion, was considered to be the source of myths and legends about werewolves and cannibalistic human beings. It seemed that there was some truth in this primitive folk tale, and as the crew succumbed to the ergot they turned on each other with brutal enthusiasm. None aboard the *Vulture Six* wanted to think too much about the details of that savagery, to consider such madness was not part of the job description.

Nobody left to save.

Rhett breathed out and tapped the control panel to shut off the water. He keyed his personal deck code, one assigned to each visitor to Andromeda upon arrival and registration of their bank account, to cover the bill. He stepped out of the shower, feeling cleaner at least, if no less haunted.

The vulture toweled off and walked from the small lavatory into the room that he'd rented. It was sparsely furnished, which suited Rhett fine, with a single table, one vid screen, indirect track lighting, and a modest bed. The young woman, who called herself Andromeda, just like every other table girl who'd lived her entire life on the station, was still asleep. It was early in the morning according to the *Vulture Six* cycle, though for Andromeda Station and all the locals it was the dead of night cycle.

She's off the clock so let her sleep, thought Rhett as he paused to observe her for a moment, she was a freelancer so it wasn't like there was a pimp or madame somewhere waiting to put her back on deck. He'd been rough on her, it was always like that for him after gunfights and a long haul, but she'd been with him last time *Vulture Six* docked here and had done her work with no complaints.

We all have a job to do, thought Rhett as he put on his deck clothes, just a simple black t-shirt and cargo pants, a welcome change after weeks in either armor or a flight suit. Rhett walked quietly over to the small table, picked up a garishly colored glass bottle and poured himself a measure of mescal.

It was an expensive drink, made dirtside on only a handful of worlds in corporate space, the best of which came from the Solis Confederacy controlled agri-world of Dakat. Most low rent space jockeys across the universe spent their money drinking whatever the local grog happened to be, but Rhett found that he had a taste for the finer things.

“Live while we yet live,” whispered Rhett to himself before knocking back the drink and savoring the complex taste of it as the burning liquid slid over his tongue and down his throat.

“Good saying, Bossman,” said Andromeda from behind him as she lifted herself up on her elbows, rising from sleep and turning on the charm instantly as only a professional could.

“I can’t remember where I heard that, probably just the talk,” said Rhett as he poured himself and Andromeda each a fresh measure of mescal.

“The talk is good, if you scope the trash,” Andromeda said as she winked at Rhett and accepted his offered glass.

They were quiet for a moment, the Vulture and the table girl, as they fixated on the expensive libation. Rhett’s mind fell into old patterns, and he began to think about the AG16 again.

The crew that changed must have had some primitive instinct to band together eventually, perhaps they’d grouped into tiny packs of madmen and eventually the most violent of them won control of the ship. They were all in void suits, and considering all of the garbage floating around they’d been living on whatever they could scavenge. Most void suits, at least those for deep space operators, had nutrient valves that would allow the wearer to puncture a sealed food or liquid packet and consume it through a small tube in their helmet. After six months they were probably all on the verge of starvation and had certainly depleted their breathable. Rhett told himself that they’d all have died gasping within a few days anyway.

“Got that dark still on you, Bossman,” observed Andromeda as she emerged from beneath the sheets to grasp Rhett’s empty glass, taking the opportunity to draw close to him, pressing her naked form against the vulture. “Need a tumble before you go? I charge you half.”

Rhett suddenly became aware of just how beautiful she was and what she represented. Andromeda, like so many others this far out, was a multi-generational spaceborne. Over the centuries the human

body began to adapt to the false gravity of starships and stations, and as a result, they developed unique physical features. Andromeda was taller than Rhett, who himself stood at just over six feet, and she had long winnowy features that revealed her elongated skeletal structure. She spoke the station patois, a dialect that developed on bustling stations where multitudes of corporations and cultures mixed. She might leave the station one day, as table girls made good money and were considered a protected class by Port Authority, regardless of what corporation ran any given station. As a registered sex worker she would be able to transfer her license from Andromeda to any other station in corporate space, regardless of her Aegis citizenship. So long as she remained in the black, she could be free and healthy, a true born creature of necrospace.

In her body, Rhett saw the relentless adaptive prowess of humanity, and in her eyes he saw a young woman who still found some joy in this universe, even if every moment of it was earned hard. This wasn't about the AG16, it never was about the carrion duty, even if he tried to pretend it was for his own sake. The blood on his hands from the Dunhill Massacre would never wash off, no matter how long he stood under that damn shower head, and as she leaned in to probe his interest with a kiss, the vulture knew she wouldn't have cared. Sex work was like gun work, revealing the best and the worst in people, and it was best to just get on with it.

Rhett returned her kiss and they slowly sank back into bed, the mescal on their shared breath, enjoying each other's warmth for a brief time as the station around them lumbered through the cold expanse.

On the drift.

8. JOURNEY WELL

Rhett inhaled deeply as he walked into the dimly lit food court of Andromeda Station and his senses were pleasantly assaulted with all manner of aromas.

Open flames were banned by the Port Authority due to how much breathable air they depleted, but there was no prohibition against cooking in the open. Food of every kind roasted, boiled, and fried on electric burners, filled the multi-layered deck with an enticing tangle of smells. Where most other decks were equipped with a variety of aroma-emitters to help mask the scent of unwashed bodies and recycled air, the food court relied on the wares of its vendors to out smell its inhabitants.

The vulture stood on the mid-deck and observed the bustling court for a moment. He had been on a great many stations and orbitals in his time, not only as a vulture but harkening back to his cor-sec days, before T4. This was a franchise station, one of the massive spaceports that were licensed and governed by the Port Authority, but that was home to a multitude of corporate citizenry.

Throughout the universe, corporate citizens, for the most part, only interacted with people not in their corporation when it was time to make trade or make war. Entire generations of people would live their lives in a single sector, sometimes even a single system or planet.

Totalitarian corporate cultures like Helion managed their citizen's mobility through careful regulation, while Grotto institutional policy made mobility for the average citizen economically impossible. Other, less protectionist corporations like Aegis, Rubicon, and Augur cultivated an engaged and mobile citizenry, even if this approach did not yield the overt human resource power that mega-corps like Grotto or Helion enjoyed.

Andromeda Station was founded by venture capitalists from Aegis, who built the core station and the chop yard. Port Authority for this station was an Aegis backed local government, though other companies and organizations were welcome to set up shop aboard the station, so long as they played by the rules and paid their fees. In corporate culture each accredited citizen was a representative of their corporation as much as a tax paying subject, and that sovereignty was acknowledged universally on franchise stations. Places like Andromeda served as neutral ground, which was both their blessing and their curse, as such stations, by their very nature, could only exist on the fringes of any system. Aegis might own the controlling interest in Andromeda, but the presence of so much unregulated trade and foreign corporate citizens meant that Andromeda was required to

maintain a vast distance between it and the more civilized areas of Aegis corporate space.

In other words, it was the perfect place for the people who made their living in necrospace, be they traders, long haulers, gunslingers, or basic scavengers. Fees and taxes flowed back into Aegis coffers without the corporation having to get directly involved.

For Rhett, that meant all manner of food, drink, and affordable company.

Ever since the headhunter bought his sentence, those had been the only things Rhett had felt worth carrying on for. A man with such simple goals fit comfortably into the life pulse of a place like Andromeda Station. Few actively sought a life on the fringe, and unless one was born into this, finding oneself out here was the result of a cascading series of choices, each harder than the next and pushing a person further and further out.

Often the vulture considered that things would have been better if he'd been one of the few cor-sec casualties inflicted by the Dunhills before they were wiped out. That, at least, would have relieved him of the weight he now carried. Every hostile salvage became T4 in his mind eventually, either in the heat of the action or in the shattering come down after the rush. He had never been a suicidal man, unlike several others he had known and lost during his time in the penal colony. Rhett knew that whenever he did meet his end it would be a long time coming and well deserved. It was in his nature to fight for every moment of life, and if he didn't have the will to end his life he might as well embrace the simple pleasures of it.

He was still reeling from his encounter with the table girl, Andromeda, and the mescal had done its job of taking the edge off of his nerves.

"Calibos!" called a voice behind and above him, and Rhett turned to see Vitrian Holt approaching down a set of stairs, "I'm surprised to see you here, figured you'd be locked in your room with some pretty thing."

"Your sense of propriety is appalling, Holt, you know that, right?" Rhett shouted back as the pilot walked over to him. "I'm heading down to Tae Mae's to meet the new guy, but nobody said I had to do it sober."

"We've only been here for eighteen hours and fleet already has Vader's replacement online," observed Vitrian, shaking his head in apparent disbelief. "I know you indentured guys are expendable assets, but come on, Vader was a top tier cutter, can't be too many of those just floating around."

"Probably just that a headhunter barge was close enough to respond when we cashed the AG16 bounty," mused Rhett, choosing

not to take offense to Vitrian's comment, as it was common for Aegis citizens aboard the vulture ships to think of themselves as a cut above the indentured scrappers. He might have to put his fist through the pilot's face one day, but Rhett had learned first-hand just how profoundly one could be punished for harming officers, and the kid was okay in his own way.

"Once we're fully crewed we'll be re-activated and have to start catching again," grumbled Vitrian as he followed Rhett down the stairs towards the lower decks, where the majority of the drinking establishments were. "Ever since the Grotto Reaper strike it seems like we never get the full three days of shore leave we're supposed to be owed by the contract."

"Unionizing certainly did ramp up the motivation factor on those salvage marines," agreed Rhett as they passed through a crowd of long haulers spilling out of a grog tavern, forcing Rhett to use his size to maintain his personal space as the drunken group clogged the narrow walkways. "But they're still doing bulk salvage, no way a Reaper tug would bother with individual lost ships, so most likely we don't ever have to worry about them."

"Grotto specifically doesn't honor registered bounties," said Vitrian, raising his voice so that Rhett could hear him over the din of the rough spoken long haulers who were well into their grog. "You and the twins are badasses, but if we start having to compete with them directly I don't see how the vulture program remains viable."

"You've seen enough of necrospace to know that we'll never be out of a job. Ships and stations die every day," Rhett assured his pilot as they ducked under a low sign indicating that they'd reached their destination. "This scrapyard is big enough for all of us."

The two men entered Tae Mae's, a dim, yet festive, establishment with a handful of simple tables and a modest kitchen behind the bar. The owner, Tae Mae herself, nodded at the two men, recognizing them as regulars, and gestured for them to enter the back room. Rhett had found this place years ago on his first shore leave from *Vulture Six*, and ever since then it had become the favorite of the crew as well.

Rhett walked past the bar with Vitrian, moving through the cheap beaded curtain that separated the main room from a small area big enough for one table. Captain Estrada waited for them, already sipping on a beverage and sharing a plate of what appeared to be roasted insects with a stocky man who had the look of a soldier to him. His hair was down to his shoulders and he had a beard, which threw Rhett off, considering the man's military bearing.

"Gentlemen, meet John Kratos," said Captain Estrada, his speech slurred only slightly, as he too was a man who took his shore leave seriously. "Former Reaper and the Vulture's newest cutter."

“A salvage marine?” breathed Rhett, glancing at Vitrian to see that the pilot was positively seething.

“I’ve been disavowed actually,” nodded John Kratos, with a smile that seemed to Rhett to be a mixture of grim acceptance and reluctant pride. “For dereliction of duty and theft of corporate property. Drink?”

After several rounds of the stinging citrus drinks that Tae Mae kept bringing to the small room, even Vitrian started to relax.

It was a professional courtesy that the captain refrained from discussing the details of any scrapper’s headhunter profile with the rest of the crew, though most among *Vulture Six* had little to hide from each other. The sort of choices that resulted in a person being part of a Vulture crew generally spoke for themselves. Captain Estrada was the only person on the ship with access to everyone’s profile, and it was he who would approve or deny any headhunter submission. Given that sort of insight into his crew, Rhett felt that the captain was much more compassionate than he often let on.

Most Vulture captains were known to treat their indentured crew as if they were little better than slaves, seemingly determined to squeeze every ounce of return from the company’s investment in acquiring them. While the average bounty scrapper could pay off their obligation to the company within seven or eight years, most of them ended their tour of duty without any savings and were soon either on the drift or wrapped up in some new kind of trouble. Captain Estrada, for his part, took the Aegis mindset of rehabilitation seriously, something he was discussing with John Kratos emphatically when Rhett returned from the lavatory.

“Each bounty we turn in will be paid to fleet, who will then transfer everyone’s individual cut to the *Six*, minus repayment obligations and processing fees,” explained Estrada in between bites of their second plate of roasted insects. “From there I split your amount between personal pay and a compulsory savings account which you can access when, and if, you survive the completion of your indentured term.”

“That isn’t the exact way the headhunter explained it to me, sir,” said John, also munching on the pungent appetizers, “Though I see the wisdom in it. I may have less direct control over my finances, though upon fulfilling my obligation to the fleet I’ll have something waiting for me.”

“I’ve been in this business a long time, Kratos, and I’ve seen what happens to most scrappers when their tour is over. Vultures like Calibos here,” said Estrada, jerking his thumb at Rhett casually as the former trooper returned to his seat, “Have a hole in them, and they’ll spend every bit of their cash on every vice you can imagine trying to fill that hole. When the duty is done they don’t have anything to show

for it, and more often than not they end up in prison or on the drift."

"That's some brutal honestly, Boss," observed John, looking over at Rhett with a look of genuine confusion, giving Rhett the impression that his life in the Reaper Corps was somewhat more regimented than what he was experiencing in his first few hours as a part of the *Six* crew.

"You'll get used to it," snorted Rhett.

"Aegis is a good company, sure, it's got an unsavory side, usually the side we work with, truth be told, but building towards something is important. As captain of the *Six*, it's my prerogative to cultivate a crew that knows there's something waiting for them after all of this," continued Estrada, his face flushed from the drinking and his breath coming out in short bursts. "Before we catch the next hunt, you'll need to name a beneficiary if you get smoked, if there's anything left afterwards, the account goes towards your obligation to the company."

"We had something similar in Grotto, a death benefit," said John. "Used to be that dying and the activation of the death benefit was one of the better things a marine could do for the people back home. Our pay was decent, but with a military health plan that barely covered most combat injuries and the compounded interest of our life bonds, most of us were in debt until death. Now that the Reapers are unionized there's more of a chance for life after duty."

"Well, this is no marine outfit and the *Six* certainly isn't a Reaper tug, but I can promise you this," stated Estrada, picking up a bottle of the strong citrus drink and pouring everyone a fresh round before leaning back in his chair. "Do your job and the company will take care of you. Survive your service and you'll have the money for a fresh start. Die and we'll send you off proper. That's my promise."

Rhett and Vitrian shared a silent look as they recognized that the captain had finally had too much of the good things. Just like Rhett had his preferred shore leave activities, some might even describe them as rituals, the captain had his own. Estrada was from the city of Delcan, on Purdeshi Prime, one of the central planets in the Aegis corporate empire, and his heritage shone through not just in his accent and bearing, but his current display.

Delcan was what was known as a 'wake city', and had a thriving funerary tourism industry. People from all over Aegis space, specifically those who could afford it, came to Delcan to inter their dead and hold lavish celebrations to honor them. The city was both a mega-graveyard and a perpetual party, and the captain was holding a wake in his own small way for Vader. The two men had seen this happen twice before during their time on the *Six*, knew that Estrada took their losses personally, and tended to celebrate hard.

Rhett reached out and picked up his glass, then stood up, holding it out before him. Vitrian did the same after a moment. Captain Estrada picked up his glass and looked at John for a moment as the former marine picked up his.

"You're filling the mag-boots of a good man, John Kratos," Estrada stated before standing up to his full height and holding his glass out before him, mirroring Vitrian and Rhett.

"Journey well, Vader Burien," said Rhett, knocking back his entire drink in one gulp. Then, instead of swallowing all of it, he spits some back into the glass, in keeping with the Delcan tradition of leaving some in respect for the dead.

"Journey well, Vader Burien," echoed Captain Estrada and Vitrian, repeating the Delcan farewell saying, before they too drank and spat.

"Journey well, Vader Burien," mimicked John awkwardly, his radically secular Grotto upbringing making him visibly uncomfortable with any sort of funerary ritual beyond the pragmatism of cremation or jettison. "Journey well."

The next day, their heads foggy from too much drink the evening before, the crew found themselves awakened to a terse supply order from the captain and notification that they were shipping out.

"It's a strange thing, Rhett, I've been on board a few stations like this in my time, but never when it was alive. Everything is so, I don't know, colorful. It's almost too much," mused John as he watched the vessel deck's endless hustle and bustle of merchant ships, traders, and long haulers going about their daily commerce. "Diversity is unnerving for a lifelong Grotto man, truth be told."

"It was a lot for me, too, though I think the penal colony forced some of that on me early. Everything here exists in a sort of balance, and while we might be the lowest of the low, that's its own kind of defense," Rhett explained as he grasped the other end of the heavy case and helped John lift it off the deck and into the cargo skiff. "We belong to something larger than ourselves. The table girls are part of the station, they even take the name of whatever station they're on, and nobody will lay a finger on them that isn't consented and paid in full. We are indentured men, so we have the protection of Aegis even though we aren't citizens. The accredited citizens have whatever corporation they owe fealty to. As long as you can pay your way, nobody will mess with you here, no matter how much you might stick out as a newcomer."

"That's what the headhunter told me after I woke back up," laughed John. He shook his head. "She said that I'd have been better off hiding back home on Kratos 3 than trying to blend in with the rest of the universe. Apparently, citizens of Grotto, even those on the run,

are exceptionally easy to distinguish from among the other corporate peoples."

"What were you running from, if you don't mind me asking?" questioned Rhett as they finished loading the last of the crates and began to walk the skiff back towards the *Six*, "Same thing everyone is, I imagine. War, oppression, lack of opportunity."

"Good guess, Calibos, but no. It might be hard to believe considering what you might think you know about Grotto, but most of us just accept our lot in life and do our best. I didn't join the Reapers to escape, and I don't hate my former corporation. I just wanted a better pay grade and to see something other than the smoke stacks of my little polluted hab-block on Kratos 3." John and Rhett moved the skiff through the crowded vessel deck and up a narrow plank that leads to the docking chamber which held *Vulture Six* and several other mid-sized starships. "For me it was the Gedra, I wanted to get as far away from them as I possibly could. Even if that meant going AWOL."

"You're kidding, right? The Gedra? Bogeymen from the other side of the Ellisian Line," spat Rhett incredulously while keying in his access code to lower the cargo hatch on the underside of the *Six*. "The talk is that they're made up, more disinformation to feed the masses while Helion and Grotto finish cleaning up the mess their trade war left behind."

"Headhunter said the same thing, so believe what you want scrapper," retorted John as he put some extra muscle behind hefting his end of the crate so that Rhett had to pump his legs to keep it steady. "Doesn't change what I saw, what happened. Anyway you asked, so there it is."

"No offense intended, John," replied Rhett, stopping his work to extend his open hand to the former marine. "The talk is good, but sometimes tall tales get told as truth. What would I know about it anyway? I've spent the last ten years either in lockdown or on the *Six* in necrospace and lived my whole life in the Tardis system before that."

"Yeah, I guess it does all sound like something from an old vid," John said. He smiled, then pumped Rhett's offered hand. "I forget how crazy it sounds, you just live with something for so long it all seems normal."

"Wild. So you're an Ellisian trade war vet, eh?" asked Rhett as he and John continued unloading the skiff, moving cutter combustibles, welding gel, and sealed foodstuffs into their appropriate areas inside the ship's cargo hold. "Fleet must be congratulating themselves on your acquisition."

"The headhunter seemed pleased with herself," agreed John before slotting the skiff back into its wall mount, the work finally

done. “I went AWOL just after the Reaper strike, so technically, I was unionized prior to being captured. The headhunter made more selling me as a Vulture than she would have returning me to Grotto. This sure beats breaking rocks on some tomb world, which is where I’m sure they’d have dropped me.”

“At least with us you’ll have a torch in your hand and a paycheck,” nodded Rhett as he closed the hatch and engaged the pressure seal. “We represent a sizable investment on the part of Aegis, high capacity people aren’t cheap. Considering the alternatives, this can be a good life, while it lasts.”

The vulture walked over to the comms panel and keyed the bridge.

“We are buttoned up and ready to shake dust,” Rhett said to the tiny screen which showed Vitrian in the pilot’s chair nodding as he worked a series of controls off screen.

“Roger that, Calibos,” said Vitrian as he began to warm up the engines, “Holt out.”

The two men left the cargo hold and took their places next to the rest of the crew, who were already strapped into their flight seats.

9. THE HUNT

Vulture Six sped through the void, its course plotted and the autopilot engaged so that the ship could make micro-adjustments should the sensors pick up any unforeseen obstacles while Vitrian was away.

Rhett wiped his face with one of the moisture panels that sat next to the folding sink in his modest berth. In the small mirror he looked at his face, checking his skin to make sure he hadn't missed any spots during his shave. He folded his mirror back into the wall and rubbed his clean-shaven face, something he'd taken for granted back in his cor-sec days.

The former trooper saw shaving as something of a luxury, one of the holdovers from his time in lockdown, where convicts were groomed by machines.

Groomed was a nice way to say it, thought Rhett with a grim chuckle as he ran the panel over his face one last time. Rhett had been serving his sentence on a penal labor colony without a name, just a designation code of TPC2229, located inside a small moon with a wide orbit around Tardis 2. Rubicon wasn't about to let human resources go to waste, and so the convicts were used as manual laborers.

The moon was home to an ink-rock refinery, where, in place of the expensive equipment that accredited citizens would use to work the stones, the convicts were equipped with crude tools and little in the way of safety equipment. Doing the work they did meant that the convicts were often covered in raw ink and stone dust by the end of a shift. The company that operated the colony was not about to tighten the profit margin by providing the water needed to allow the convicts to clean up, and so an alternate hygiene solution was implemented.

Rhett and the other convicts called it the 'burner box', and it was aptly named. Groups of ten convicts at a time would be marched into a metal container roughly the size of a standard cargo pod. Once sealed inside the convicts would be bombarded with a three-hundred-sixty-degree laser bath. Not only would it burn away the cheap paper jumpsuits the convicts wore in the refineries, but it would singe off every last strand of hair on their bodies, not to mention the first layer of skin. An instant after the lasers ignited, the container would be flooded with compressed air, making the entire room into a tempest of body ash for a few seconds before the filters picked everything up.

He zipped up his flight suit and looked around the berth, taking note of just how little he had in the way of personal belongings. Beyond a few sets of station clothes and a civilian grade tablet, the former convict had no material possessions. A man like him didn't

need personal affects, though Rhett, before opening the hatch and closing it behind him as he entered the narrow hallway of the berth deck. Anything he considered of value was transitory anyway.

He was reminded of Andromeda in that moment, the young woman whose scent still lingered in his nostrils, though more likely his imagination. The Vulture was surprised to discover that he wanted to return to the station, to feel those arms wrapped around him again. It wasn't like him to form attachments to anything or anyone, much less a professional. He flexed his hand, opening and closing his fist. Perhaps he was feeling ill at ease with the, as yet, undisclosed bounty. Captain Estrada usually held the bounty briefing in pre-flight, before leaving the station. This time however, the meeting wasn't until well after they were enroute.

The former trooper walked down the hallway and through the door leading to the main deck. He came to the large chamber near the center of the ship, a room that doubled as the mess hall and a meeting space. Quinn Eros was already there talking with Captain Estrada, something about having gone to watch the breakers take apart the AG16. The engineer had never been one to fully disconnect from the job when she had shore leave, so it was of little surprise.

In fact, Rhett decided, it might have been rather cathartic to see the AG16 get chopped. Pieces of that ship would end up being bought and sold across the sector, and the more he thought about it the more chilled he became at the prospect that the next time *Vulture Six* went in for repairs it could be that they ended up with pieces of the AG16. Such was the endless cycle of manufacture and refurbishing that kept the gears of necrospace turning.

"Calibos, you should have seen it," said Quinn as she turned to greet Rhett before picking up her tablet and taking a seat near Captain Estrada's folding lectern. "They flooded the agri-hauler with hydrogel after patching the hull, then did a rapid decompress. It was amazing, I've never seen a water capture before."

"Usually, we don't haul in a rotting corpse either," said Bella Mons as she entered the room along with Sparks and Doak. "That's the first bio-hazard we've had since the *Flint*, and that was years ago."

"Good to put that one behind us," nodded Doak before sitting down on the far end of the table, nearest the door that closed behind John as the former salvage marine entered the room and took a seat next to Rhett.

"Vultures are only as good as the last bounty," said the captain while the remainder of the small crew assembled in the briefing room. "The sooner we sink our teeth into something new the AG16 will be old news, and you won't be waiting long, we've already got a hit."

Rhett was impressed that Bella had been able to get a hit so

quickly after docking with Andromeda Station, that was a new record, even for her, which was saying something.

Vulture Six, like the other bounty scrapper vessels in the fleet, was equipped with an array of short, mid, and long range sensors, in addition to direct access to an Aegis transit database. As the tech officer, it was Bella's job to find their next target.

"I understand that we have a powerful array on the *Six*," John commented, folding his arms across his chest and turning his head sideways to speak with Rhett. "However, the headhunter was less than clear about exactly how we're supposed to hunt down bounties out there in the void."

"Well, it's a proprietary tech solution mainly, not something they disclose until you're part of the team, signed and sealed as it were," said Rhett. "As we move through the sector, Bella will drop data spores, they're these metal orbs that are about the size of your fist. She marks where she dropped them, and for the most part, they stay on the drift in that general area. They don't have much sensor range, but she's dropped hundreds, and they all feed data back to her. When a ship or void debris is scanned that data is compared to the bounty registry. She gets a hit, then we have coordinates and we launch."

"It's kind of like fishing," offered Vitrian as he walked past the men and took a seat on the other side of Captain Estrada's lectern. He met the blank looks he was getting from both most everyone in the room and snorted, "Never mind."

"Calibos is making it seem less tedious than it actually is," smiled Bella as she activated a three-dimensional display at the center of the table which showed the sector and dozens upon dozens of tiny pinpricks of light indicating the data spores. "Truthfully, I spend day after day sifting through what I get from the spores hoping to make a connection. Fleet rents me time on the station's network so I have more computing power. The sector is huge, and my grid is full of holes, but we do okay. This is unmapped space, mostly because it's just void and a few rocks outside of the shipping lanes. Most of the bounties we score are just scrap jobs, like the AG16, but every now and then we secure targets marked for recovery."

"Those sit in the yard until somebody comes to pick them up," added Sparks, "Those bounties are either tragic or spooky, never had a straight recovery that wasn't some kind of horror show."

"In my experience, any salvage involves wading through someone else's tragedy," John stated, before adding, "This is the job."

"Okay, that's everybody," said Captain Estrada, his voice carrying through the small room as the twins, Dante and Drago, entered and took their seats. "Let's get this started. Mons, if you please."

Bella nodded and keyed her tablet, the commands making the

display zoom in on one of the data spores near the edge of the sector where mapped space bordered the rugged frontier and unmapped space beyond. She brought up another display that showed close range photos of a wicked looking vessel, one of the sleek cutters preferred by mercenaries, smugglers, and slavers.

From the vids that followed, Rhett could see the ship slide by the data spore as the tiny machine's optics took detailed scans of the ship's dimensions, speed, and trajectory.

"No markings, no active propulsion, and look at those plates on the side there," said Vitrian as he leaned forward in his seat to punch in a command that replayed the vid, before pausing it so he could point at the dull black plates grafted to the side of the ship, "Those are low grade stealth grafts."

"It's a miracle the ship came so close to the data spore, if it had been even a few kilometers out, the optics wouldn't have picked it up," agreed Bella as she took control of the display and brought up the other data readouts from the spore. "The grafts baffled all my scanners, so I had to identify this with visuals only."

"The people who fly ships like that aren't going to show up in any database, even the transit records are going to lie to you because they probably have forged credentials," argued Vitrian, still seemingly incredulous that Bella was able to identify the ship.

"I thought the same thing, Holt," agreed Captain Estrada, who then keyed his own tablet and put the bounty profile on display for everyone to see, "Until I saw this."

The bounty profile was a single page, shorter and more lacking in details than any profile Rhett had ever seen. Usually, they knew everything there was to know about a target before hunting it down. The profile was streaked with black lines across nearly every piece of information, having been heavily redacted by whoever placed the bounty in the registry. The only useful information not blacked out was a series of photos of the ship itself, several of them noting the unique after-market modifications to the vessel that would distinguish it from others of the same make and model. It looked ugly, it looked mean, and the redacted streaks of black leapt out at Rhett, silent and foreboding.

"What am I looking at, Captain?" asked Rhett, his guts twisting into knots as he looked at the replay of the ship passing by the data spore, a dark shape set against the pitch black of space, a predator seemingly on the drift.

"A nameless cutter with stealth grafts and a redacted bounty profile," sighed Vitrian as he rubbed his temples, "That we wouldn't have even noticed had it not basically run over Bella's data spore. We should let this one go Captain."

“Says the salary man,” growled Doak.

“Enough, I’ve already flagged it on the registry as being in progress, we are doing this. Straight recovery mission. We track it down, secure it, and tow the monster back to the yard,” said Estrada while he zoomed the display in on the reward being offered for the ship, “As you know, I am generally not inclined to go after blackline bounties, though I’ve never seen one that pays what this one does. You understand why we can’t pass this one up, yes? We score this one and half of you will have your indentured obligations wiped with money to spare.”

“That’s a slave ship,” John spoke up finally, after looking intently at the video, ignoring the other displays. He picked up his tablet and looked at it for a moment, until Rhett realized that the former marine did not know how to manipulate the display and helped the man key in his commands.

“If you look at the aft section you can see that it’s been modified. Those slots on the hull are for pressurized cargo pods. They’ll keep the high value stock in the main hold and then put bulk captures in shared pods that get slotted into the hull,” said John as he zoomed in on the display to show what he described, before zooming out and then into another section of the ship where what looked like a massive tuning fork had been attached. “That’s a ship grappler, it shorts the prey’s vital systems so that boarding actions go more smoothly. This is Tasca Cartel, no doubt about it. Back during the Ellisian trade war we Reapers had to fight these guys off of prize salvages more than a few times.”

“Well, even without the grafts baffling my scanners I’d have no way of knowing for sure if the ship has power or anyone aboard, the spores have their limits,” said Bella while she pulled up a star chart and activated a navigation simulation. “I was, however, able to extrapolate their trajectory from the close-range scans and plot a course proposal. Vitrian should be able to make minor mods to this plot and have us intercepting in a week or so.”

“I know we didn’t get the amount of shore leave you people are accustomed to, and after the AG16 and losing Vader, this might seem to you like we’re pushing it. You aren’t wrong, we could have all used more downtime, and mission fatigue is nothing to scoff at,” said the captain as he made eye contact with each person in the room, “However, I have always made it my policy to be honest with you when it comes to this job, and so I must tell you that once Bella ran the image comparison in the registry, this mission was marked as alpha priority with the bonus reward you saw before. That’s right, fleet contacted me directly and we were ordered to pull anchor and get this done.”

Captain Estrada zoomed in once more on the ship and let the image of it fill the display.

“Someone very important has a vested interest in recovering this vessel,” said the captain as they all gazed at the silent ship. “If Kratos is right, and this is a slave ship, that would explain why the profile is redacted. The fact remains that it was entered into the registry, so a degree of collusion from far above our pay grade is implicit. This job is ours whether we want it or not people, so let’s get it done and hope the next one has us back on the scrap. We have a week before intercept, so rest up for the next two cycles and then start your drills. Dismissed.”

10. SLAVE SHIP

The week passed quickly for Rhett, and he was thankful for that. He needed to be engaged, whether it was the heat of the mission or the depths of pleasant vice, he needed to be in the action to feel steady. It was the downtime that always twisted him up, when he had time and space to think, to remember, to consider what he could have done differently. There was much to do in the way of preparing for the mission, as there had been meager shore leave, and much of the refitting work was yet to be done.

Kratos turned out to be as capable a soldier as he was a cutter, which came as no surprise to Rhett. Neither Kratos nor Rhett was any match for the former cultist twins when it came to marksmanship, though John was a former salvage marine. Being a man with wartime military experience made John unique amongst the group, and Rhett was pleased to have him on the team. Vader had been a skilled cutter, one of the best in the business, though when it came to combat he was more like Sparks and Quinn, less like the hardened veterans Rhett suspected might be needed.

Soon the nameless ship had transformed from an image on the briefing display to a dark shape materializing out of the void ahead of *Vulture Six*. Rhett stood behind Vitrian as the pilot brought the *Six* into scanning range. Captain Estrada and Bella were pouring over the data coming back from the scanners, and Rhett found himself unable to look away from the ship.

It was roughly the same size as *Vulture Six*, though it was outfitted for ship-to-ship engagements, that much Rhett could see with his own eyes at long last. Once they'd had more time to track the ship it had become clear that the vessel had fired its engines at maximum, possibly to break orbit from whatever dirtside it had originated from, and shortly after it hit void the engines burned out from the stress. Now that they were in visual range even Rhett, without extensive knowledge of ships, could see that the thrusters were slagged. It still hurled through space at a good speed, though nothing a ship with working thrusters couldn't easily keep pace with.

The ship positively radiated with menace, and Rhett wasn't the only one who felt it.

"Back home there are these predatory fish that hunt in the open waters of Brittle Sea, where my family would sometimes visit before I signed on with the fleet," said Vitrian, partly to Rhett and seemingly partly to the room itself, his voice thick, "Sharks, they were called. Really, just eating machines, endlessly prowling the waters, always hungry. That, my indentured friend, isn't a ship, it's a shark."

“Then let’s hope it’s a dead one so we can do this and head back to the light,” said Rhett as he clapped Vitrian on the shoulder before turning around to address the captain.

“Orders, sir?” asked Rhett.

“The grafts are baffling even the ship’s systems, we’re going to have to put you down the hard way,” sighed Estrada as he rubbed his eyes. He looked away from the display and out towards the ship ahead of them. “Assume this is a hostile salvage, but, and this is important, I’ve been given an update to the profile. I’ll send it to your tablet, they want the nav computer as the prime goal aside from any intact cargo. Good hunting.”

Less than an hour later Rhett activated the mag-clamps as his booted feet planted themselves upon the dark hull of the slave ship. At least there hadn’t been any debris to fight through during the drop, he thought as the rest of the team hit hull and began scampering over the ship. They moved quickly, each of them having spent the last week listening to Kratos describe his violent encounters with the Tasca operatives. Even Quinn was not her usually chatty self, and the team proceeded in silence as they converged on the main hatch for the cargo hold.

Doak cut a hole in the hatch so that Quinn could snake her camera inside, and immediately Rhett could see in her display the body of a bullet riddled operative in a lite grade dropsuit floating amidst bloody ice crystals and spent shell casings.

“John and Sparks, I want you to stay hullside, get that ship grappler disabled, just in case. That way the *Six* can get in here and pull us if we get into trouble we can’t handle. Scout the rest of the hull for any other weapons systems, disable it all,” ordered Rhett as he gave Doak the signal to cut the lock for entry. “Dante, on point, Drago, on overwatch, the rest of you stack on me. Here we go.”

Doak cut the lock while Quinn and Rhett heaved with their tools, opening the hatch with only a minimal rush of air as the ship decompressed. The body of the operative in the dropsuit soared out of the opening and into open space, soon fading into the black as the scrappers entered the dead vessel. Immediately, the group activated their various lights and illuminated the large cargo hold. It was empty, save for a few pieces of floating debris and spent shell casings.

“Well, whatever they were carrying certainly isn’t here anymore, this place is picked clean,” observed Quinn as the team spread out to cover the chamber.

“There was a firefight, obviously,” observed Dante, his voice seeming even more detached in the cold confines of the dark ship. “A mixture of precision strikes and sporadic gunfire. Perhaps some of the slaves fought back.”

“Captain, I’ve got a cargo hold that’s been emptied top to bottom,” reported Rhett on the main channel. “This ship is mostly engine and cargo hold, so I’m not sure what the client is hoping to get out of this thing.”

“Remember just get to the pilot deck and secure the nav computer,” responded Captain Estrada. “So long as we have that the bounty is good.”

“Honestly, I’m glad there’s no cargo,” said Quinn as she followed Rhett and Dante towards the hatch that led to the rest of the ship. “It would have been weird to hand over a bunch of dead or cryo-napping slaves. I’m happy not to have that particular moral quandary keeping me up nights.”

“More bodies in the hallway,” noted Dante as he swept his combo-weapon back and forth across the tight corridor, knocking aside floating blood crystals and more shell casings that drifted through the zero-G interior, checking both ends before moving towards the pilot’s deck, “Dropsuits, armor punched by small arms in extreme close quarters. Looks like assault rounds, maybe a bull-pup pattern, the kind Praxis Mundi pilots fly with.”

“The cartel hires people from all walks of life, could be a Praxis pilot found their wage higher than the corporation,” observed Rhett, thinking that no matter how many times Dante or Drago displayed their preternatural knowledge of firearms he was never going to get used to their fanaticism, useful though it was, “Drago and Doak, take the right, see what you can find in the crew berth and engine chambers. Quinn, you’re with us. John, give me a sitrep.”

“The grappler is disabled, we cut the aiming mechanism and severed the power couplings. Sparks found a skiff mooring, but no skiff, maybe it was left behind wherever this launched from,” responded John over the main channel.

“Copy,” said Rhett as he and Dante walked side by side to the hatch leading to the pilot’s deck.

They both noted that the lock had been cut, and nodded at each other. Dante hefted his weapon and waited for Rhett to place his off hand on the former cultists shoulder. Rhett tapped Dante’s shoulder and the pair rushed into the darkened pilot’s deck ready for a fight.

They discovered that the fight had been finished long ago, as three corpses occupied the small pilot’s deck. One wore a dropsuit and the other two were in simple flight suits. While the dropsuit operative looked to have been blasted on full-auto at close range, the two others, presumably the pilot and engineer, had been eviscerated. What would have been grisly in a full gravity environment was absolutely nightmarish in zero G, as the carnage drifted through the cabin instead of pooling on the deck. Their blood and frozen entrails filled

the cabin, and it took everything Rhett had to keep his meal from coming back up.

While Dante kept watch as Rhett gingerly moved through the floating frozen mess and assessed the pilot's control panel. From what he could see, though he was no expert, it looked as if the controls had been set and then the connection severed. He could see the cut wires drifting lazily underneath the panel.

"Doak, report," said Rhett, his mind racing as he attempted to reconstruct what had happened on board this dead vessel.

"Crew berth be empty," came Doak's coarse voice in response. "I tell you what they left in a hurry, nothing made or stowed, just floating. Same with the engine room, its slagged from over thrusting. Nobody's home."

"Captain, we have the ship," said Rhett over the main channel, "Looks like some kind of internecene conflict or slave mutiny, five corpses, all part of the presumed crew. Someone set a flight plan and then cut the nav computer, which means they probably tried to scrub the launch coordinates too."

"Data recovery on the nav computer is someone else's problem, we just have to secure it and tow this ship back to the yard," the captain responded. "Whatever happened, wherever this ship launched from, or what it was carrying, none of that matters to us. Holt is bringing us in for tow hookup, good work everyone."

Rhett was glad not to have had to fight for the salvage, and as things went it was one of the easier hauls they'd ever had. However, something just wasn't sitting right with him, and the former trooper was ill at ease. Even compared to the AG16 this ship was bad news, worse because he couldn't see a reason why. Slavery was horrible, and yet there was something more sinister at the root of this, he felt that deep in his guts. Whatever darkness had unfolded here, he was now a part of it, entangled in the web of action and reaction, yet he could not see any of the pieces in play.

Never had he been as glad to get off a scrap vessel as he was when he finally set foot back on board the *Six*. It would take them a full week to make the tow back to Andromeda Station, and much could happen in that time.

This was a doomed ship, and the sooner they could be rid of it the better.

11. PRECIOUS THINGS

It had been months since the raid on PM2258, and Sokol Targe was getting restless. Presently, he stood quietly on an observation deck as the gruesome *Fatalis* warship rested in dry dock upon the surface Fiat Lux.

As the mech pilot watched, crews of laborers in void suits scampered over the hull of the warship, soothing the great beast's many injuries with torch, wire, and weld. It took a tremendous amount of resources to keep the *Fatalis* flying. Of the spoils seized in the raid, a full half or more had gone towards the repair and re-fit of the warship. The commune was short staffed when it came to skilled laborers, especially those qualified to maintain the battle-scarred vessel, and so what might have only taken a few weeks for a functional corporate shipyard to accomplish took several months for the Fiat Lux work crews.

The ravager commune was built inside and around a small moon that orbited a planet so long forgotten that even its name had been lost. The commune locals simply called it The Rock, as the planet had been stripped bare of all its natural resources by one or more corporations centuries ago.

There were other planets in the lonely system, in orbit around a dying star so far distant that only the most meager amounts of solar radiation and light reached the devastated planet. It wasn't much, but it was enough, and the ravagers had erected several patchwork solar panel arrays that could be crewed by a handful of people. Between what energy they gathered from the solar orbitals and batteries they won during supply raids, it was enough to keep the lights on and the systems running. Breathing resources were another matter, for a while there were a number of greenhouses and algae pools that generated food and modest breathable, the commune perpetually survived by a thin margin.

There was a price for freedom, thought Sokol as he looked past the hull of the *Fatalis* and into the defensive debris field surrounding the moon, and he was happy to be part of that violent accounting. Communal living was nothing new for Sokol. As a man born and raised in Helion Corporation, he had joined Fiat Lux as its newest ravager, he'd found himself well suited to the job and had settled in swiftly.

In the darkest corners of his mind, Sokol was pleased that the community had not achieved full self-sustainability. Without the need to raid for supplies there was no use for warriors such as himself, and he would have been a man on the drift. Sokol could farm as well as

any of them, perhaps even better considering his upbringing, but it was inside the metal womb of Ogre One that he made his contribution to the community.

Sokol absently ran his hand over his neuro-link ports, longing to feel the cold bite of his initial sync with Ogre One, and the thrill of the war machine's grindcore igniting. Like most of the other pilots, Sokol was something of an outsider, even among the other lost souls who called Fiat Lux home. It was the same with most mech pilots in the universe, Sokol reminded himself, that was part of the cost associated with being so intimate with such tremendous destructive power.

"My ports get inflamed when they've been too long parted from Night Witch," rasped Morgan as she joined Sokol on the deck, the smoky scent of her drug of choice wafting along with her. "The twist helps."

"That it does," agreed Sokol, and he took the hand rolled smokeable being offered by Morgan.

He inhaled and the acrid smoke of the dried kad leaves seared the back of his throat as it filled his lungs. Twist, as it was called, was good for soothing nerve pain as much as it was useful for blurring the hard edges of reality.

None of the mech pilots ever had to trade for it, somehow there were always a few rolls being freely given to them by other members of the commune. While there was a modest security cadre that protected the commune, and numerous defensive measures in the debris field, it was the *Fatalis* and her crew that did the fighting and the dying on the raids that kept the commune alive. In recognition of this fact, the people of Fiat Lux took care of their warriors in whatever way they could.

"We shouldn't have to wait much longer," said Sokol as he exhaled and handed the twist back to Morgan, who immediately took a long drag from it, "Another two or three day cycles at most."

"Angron volunteered for a waste shift just so he could drive the standing loader, closest thing to Thunder Walks he could get his hands on," Morgan snorted and licked her fingers, pressing them together over the burning end of the twist, snuffing out the flame before she slid the now considerably shorter roll into the pocket of her vest. "Gregory is no doubt completely drunk and trying to find another woman willing to take his seed."

"Doesn't he have five children he never sees already?" scoffed Sokol, unable to stifle a laugh. "Birth rates are high enough as it is. Get out from under the corporate boot and all people want to do is eat and breed."

"Fiat Lux isn't going to grow by itself," snarled Morgan. She suddenly grasped Sokol by the collar of his flight suit and pulled his

face down to hers and kissed him with a feral intensity. “Come on, let’s go make a baby, down in the launch bay so that the mechs can watch.”

“We aren’t the sort of people who should be parenting children,” snarled Sokol, deeply aroused at the prospect of once again bedding his comrade in view of their war machines. “And you can’t pilot if you’re pregnant anyway, the connection will flatline the fetus, you know that.”

“Nah, we’ll extract and have one of the greenhouse girls carry it,” whispered Morgan into Sokol’s ear as she slid a hand up his thigh. “Lots of couples and triples in Fiat Lux who would be overjoyed to raise our little ravager. Don’t you realize who we are to these people?”

“A little full of yourself, pilot?” smiled Sokol as he wrapped his arm around her waist and turned so that they could walk down the ramp towards an elevator that would lead them to a transit hub where they could take a skiff to the *Fatalis*.

“I want to take life or make life,” said Morgan as they entered the elevator, which began to descend slowly towards the bay, which was several decks down. “So until Kochi puts us back on the war path...”

Before Morgan could finish her sentence she and Sokol were knocked to the floor as the elevator suddenly rocked wildly. The elevator shuddered free of its track and fell several meters before crashing into the base of the shaft.

Sokol’s nose leaked blood, and as he wiped a dripping hand across his leg he could see that Morgan was injured. It appeared that she’d smacked her head against the floor or wall and he could see a trickle of blood from the left side where she’d shaved part of her hair away to make room for the neural-links. She was only out for a few seconds, but as her eyes opened Sokol could see that she probably had a concussion, as her pupils were wide as mess hall trays.

As Sokol pried open the elevator door with the emergency lever he found himself buffeted with a rush of air that swirled about the transit hub. Morgan mumbled something about Macross, the titanic battle in which he had first met her and joined with the commune, and Sokol assumed that the twist and the head injury had her slipping back into one of the PTSD episodes that sometimes triggered in the fierce woman. The artificial wind did remind him forcibly of his own experience on Macross, his mind jumping back to that terrible time.

Sokol had been part of the Helion mech corps, and they were conducting a series of field tests for the new Coyote class mechs. There were rumors of a trade war brewing between Helion and Grotto, and there had recently been a particularly costly encounter with Grotto forces on a distant planetoid called Tetra Prime. These sorts of clandestine engagements were common, though rumor had it

that both corporations had deployed elite contractors from the Merchants Militant. That, too, was common enough, as it was the clandestine conflicts that kept the universe in equilibrium, with no one corporation amassing too much power or influence. What got the rumor mill churning was the talk of escalation.

Sokol was a brilliant pilot, and deployed alongside several other experimental Coyote class mechs to the surface of Vindi 9. It was a somewhat barren planetary body, with a wind-swept desert that covered most of the surface. There were, however, pockets of civilization where Helion settlers had been doing their best to tame the environment. As it turned out, the settlers were not accredited Helion citizens at all, but freelance pioneers operating under a temporary terraforming license issued by Helion.

It was a common practice by most corporations to task freelancers with establishing initial colonies on freshly acquired worlds. The freelancers would undergo the hardships of living in the environment on a trial and error basis, making the hard discoveries about the unique qualities of life on the new planet. It was dangerous work, but the pay was reasonable enough considering that most such freelancers were only one step away from the Red List anyway, if not already on it, and becoming a colonist was a way to, at least temporarily, get off the list and enjoy some of the protections of corporate sponsorship.

Sokol thought of the scouring winds of Vindi 9 as he hauled the semi-conscious Morgan with him out of the elevator and into the transit hub. Luxers were rushing to lock down the service tunnel leading to the dry dock even as they scrambled to shut every hatch and opening leading to the rest of the commune.

The mech pilot heaved his comrade along with him as they narrowly avoided a large piece of what looked like wall plating as it flew past them and clattered down the service tunnel. He knew, deep down, that something terrible had happened, far beyond a hull breach in the transit hub, which would have been bad enough, but the entire commune's life support system must have suffered a catastrophic failure, knocked out by whatever accident or assault had breached atmospheric containment. The commune's atmosphere was bleeding into the void, and even if they could seal off the parts of Fiat Lux that hadn't already been stripped bare by the depressurization they'd have precious little air left to breathe. He felt the hollow pain in his guts, something resembling fear and the certainty of terrible things on the approach.

He'd had that same feeling on Vindi 9 as he and the other Coyote mechs patrolled several miles out from their landing craft, which served as a temporary base of operations. When they were ordered to proceed into the colony compound nearby, and to consider the

community as hostile, the feeling had turned and twisted at his insides. It did not take long for the mechs to reach the compound, a pre-fab stockade wall that enclosed the various shipping containers and hab-pods that comprised the two-hundred- person colony. The intel must have been good, as the colonists started firing on the mechs as soon as they crested the ridge, little good it would do at this range and with those civilian model weapons.

It had been nothing for the three mechs to advance upon the settlement, shattering the stockade walls with mag rounds and striding through the slagged gaps with ease.

Once inside, the mechs had made short work of the colony. Sokol did as he was ordered, and fired upon any human being he encountered. Most of the adults were armed, fighting back with determination, though hope for victory was thin, and Sokol assumed that they had somehow become seditionists. Most of the combat ops he had been involved with up to that point was against seditionists, or at least that had been what he was told in the briefings.

The mechs performed beyond anyone's expectations, handling the tight confines of the colony with grace and savagery, revealing the Coyote class to be potentially peerless as a close quarters war machine. In the final stages of the slaughter the one weakness of the Coyote was revealed.

Unexpectedly, a settler ambushed Tobin, one of the other mech pilots, using an upright cargo loader. The loader stood just as tall as the Coyote mech, and though it was a clumsy machine, the driver had been an expert pilot. The loader clamped its pincer-like appendage over the mag-cannon arm of Tobin's machine, crushing all the stabilizer fins. Then the loader's pilot had driven the points of the other arm, still holding Tobin firmly in place, through the thin vented armor that housed the mech's grindcore.

The gyroscope engines that gave the mech so much raw power also generated tremendous amounts of heat. For the mech to maintain the kind of mobility that it was designed for the grindcore had to be mounted behind vented armor instead of the coolant bath cubes of the larger mechs. What the Coyote gained in speed, agility, and ferocity, it sacrificed in armor rating. Small arms might be nothing to a Coyote, but the kinetic force of the loader's piston driven arm as it slammed into the mech over and over, revealed the weakness in grisly detail.

The loader was designed for lifting crates that weighed ten times its own considerable tonnage, and as it hit the mech's grindcore housing repeatedly, the armor buckled backwards into the spinning grindcore. Tobin and his mech were ripped apart by the grindcore as it exploded, and while the loader was thrown clear the industrial grade plating kept the pilot alive.

Sokol looked down at Morgan as the atmosphere of Fiat Lux was sucked into the void while the occupants struggled to lock everything down.

She had been that loader pilot. A teenager defending her family of freelance settlers against the metal monsters that emerged from the perpetual winds. Sokol had exited his mech and approached the downed loader on foot, determined at the time to put a round between the eyes of the pilot as revenge for his fallen comrade. He had paused when he saw the young woman linked into the loader's pilot slot.

He lifted the cracked cockpit and ripped the ident placard from her chest. All Helion citizens had such cards about their person, and it was corporate law that unless there was a special dispensation for being in armor or in the home, all citizens had to keep it visible. Authorities wanted to be able to access your personal data swiftly and at will, so in keeping with Helion ways, the freelancers were required to obtain them and display them in the Helion fashion so long as they were under the corporation's employ.

The young woman's card looked to be in order, until Sokol saw the data display flashing red with text indicating that 'Marcross colonist status' had been suspended.

The time stamp on display showed the status had been revoked hours prior to the battle.

As if his awareness had been lifted from darkness and forced into the light, Sokol realized what he'd just been a part of. These weren't seditionists, they were just average freelancers, and Helion had cut them loose mere hours before he and his comrades were instructed to wipe them out.

Mind racing, Sokol realized that the company had determined for one reason or another that this colony was no longer worth the cost of the contract. The masters of Helion were cold pragmatists, which was usually a point of corporate pride in the citizenry, and Sokol grew more convinced that this was the work of a Helion manager seizing an opportunity to engage in a weapons test and divest his or herself of a cumbersome business venture.

Sokol could feel his breath getting short as the oxygen reaching his brain was further reduced. He considered his reckless and violent defection from Helion. Sokol did not know it at the time, but one of the other colonies that had also had its license suspended, had put out an all points SOS, broadcasting on every frequency they could manage with their limited devices.

Calmly pretending to be having a headset malfunction to trick his remaining comrade into opening his cockpit so that Sokol, the freshly minted defector, could shoot him in the face, he had then helped a

shocked Morgan into the cockpit of the other Coyote mech, trusting her instincts to guide her, based on how skilled she proven to be with the loader. The *Fatalis* was already en route to their location.

Whatever madness has pushed him to fratricide and desertion, it kept him going as he and the disavowed settler pushed the mechs to the limit while they tried to put as much distance between them and the dead settlement.

Sokol had fully expected his comrades to hunt him down within the next few hours. He had no hope of surviving, yet it had been exhilarating to know that for the first time in his life he was free. Helion would have his hide for it, and if he wasn't killed outright he'd be sent to the worst prison the corporation could find after being publicly shamed. His family would suffer, either by execution or imprisonment for having failed to properly raise their child as a loyalist.

All of it had been worth these precious few moments of life as a free man.

Punishment from Helion never reached him or the girl, who he would later learn was named Morgan Tarth, as the *Fatalis* appeared in orbit over the planet. The Helion research vessel was not equipped to do battle against the already infamous Kochi the Deathless and his warship. While a security frigate exchanged fire with the *Fatalis* the research vessel withdrew the remaining experimental mechs from the planet's surface and fled the system. The security frigate, already limping from its brief struggle with the vastly superior opponent, was soon to follow, leaving the planet for the ravagers.

Soon Sokol and Morgan found themselves being made the Fiat Lux offer of membership and life. They took it gladly, and were welcomed into the fold along with their war machines. If a person was useful they were given the Fiat Lux offer, if they were not, they were killed. The SOS from Marcross 2 ended up saving fifteen individuals out of the hundreds who populated Marcross 1 through 4.

"It's a hard universe," mumbled Sokol as his vision began to swim, before the rush of air finally subsided and he passed out.

Only to awaken moments later as the atmosphere stabilized in the transit hub. Sokol shook his head to clear the cobwebs of unconsciousness and made out the shapes of people moving through the hub, trying to help those who had joined Sokol and Morgan in succumbing to the rapid decline in breathable air. Sokol blinked as more oxygen reached his brain and his sense returned to their general sharpness. He realized he was wearing an e-mask.

The pilot turned his head to see one of the commune emergency response specialists, of which there was perhaps a dozen in total, removing a mask from Morgan as the young woman struggled to her

feet. The specialist noticed Sokol stirring and moved to help the pilot to stand before removing his mask.

"Close one, Ogre," said the man as Sokol drew his first breath away from the mask, noticing right away that something wasn't right, prompting the man to nod and add, "Ox levels are thin across the Lux."

"What happened?" asked Morgan as she jumped up and down in place for a moment to get her blood pumping and shake off the lingering fugue of asphyxiation. "Are we under attack?"

"No ma'am, there was an accident in the core," answered the specialist as he packed up his small kit and started to make his way to some of the other commune members who were still struggling to recover, "Hull breaches and too many open hatches."

Before he could think much on what sort of accident it might have been, Sokol's comm began to ping with a summoning alert, as did Morgan's. He looked down and could see the light glowing green, indicating that he was to report immediately to the *Fatalis* along with Morgan. They walked to the skiff that would lead them down the tunnel to the dry dock and was joined by two other men, both swarm troopers, who had the tiny green dots of light coming from their comms as well.

They rode in silence, each of them knowing that Kochi the Deathless did not summon anyone without grave cause. Discipline might be tight on board *Fatalis*, but when they were home, the ravagers were their own person and there was no chain of command. They might enjoy a certain revered status among the others in Fiat Lux, being the warriors and providers for the community, but there was no class system and everyone, man or woman, was equal. In theory that was how it was supposed to work, and for the most part it did, though the mech pilots were something akin to unofficial celebrities in the community. Only one person commanded with absolute authority in Fiat Lux, and that was the captain of the warship *Fatalis*.

Minutes later as Morgan and the swarm troopers went to report to their duty stations, Sokol entered the captain's chamber as ordered, ushered in by two of Kochi's five personal bodyguards.

Officially, their duty was to lay down their lives to keep Kochi functional and operating the ship if the *Fatalis* was boarded. Sokol knew that the guards would not hesitate to put him down if the captain demanded it. In a community where all were equal, Kochi the Deathless was still alone in his position of power, though it was much removed from the day to day lives of the people.

Sokol walked through the sliding door and instantly his nose was assaulted with the peculiar scent of the various aromatics that were

positioned throughout the chamber. The thick miasma of complex scents very nearly masked the stinging odor of decay that wafted from the captain. No matter how many times Sokol came face to face with his captain, Kochi the Deathless was something nobody could get used to, and the pilot could see similar reactions from Gage and Lelani Ursa as they waited for his arrival.

Captain Kochi was the last known living accredited citizen of the now defunct Wageri Corporation, which put his name was on the Red List alongside every other human who called Fiat Lux home. The man was nearly one hundred and thirty standard years old, his lifelink with the ship and the sacrifice of his body all that kept him alive.

In the Wageri tradition, a young Kochi had been outfitted with dozens of body ports and sat in the inclined grav couch that was the pilot's throne. He had not risen from that throne in over a century, and his body showed the signs of his age and the grueling task that had become his life's purpose. The steady infusion of nutrients and life-sustaining chemicals had slowed the aging process down tremendously. Currents of electricity routinely contracted his muscles to keep his body from atrophying. The secrets of maintaining the Wageri technology had been lost when the company was broken and its people scattered through the universe like so much debris.

During the Wageri collapse Kochi and the crew of the *Fatalis* went rogue, having decided that if they were going to be Red List they might as well go into the unknown with a warship. With half their crew and their own captain slain in the mutiny to control the ship, Kochi assumed command from his pilot's throne. Life on the Red List was brutal and short, especially for those who turned to piracy, but with the might of the *Fatalis* a community of the desperate and the daring began to form around the warship. Eventually, nearly half a century later, the Fiat Lux ravager commune took shape.

He might be Kochi the Deathless, thought Sokol as he looked at the captain's withered and weary form, but the man was losing his struggle with time, even if he was the last of his original crew still clinging to life. Kochi's body had begun to slowly rot as the chemicals that sustained him gradually fouled with time, for there was no technology to replace it or Wageri engineer to maintain it.

When the captain died, so would the *Fatalis*, at least in its current form. The ravagers of Fiat Lux were exceptional scavengers, and they'd be able to keep the warship alive enough to become the key battle station in the defensive debris field, but they'd have to conduct their raids without it.

Seeing the captain instantly made Sokol think of Ogre One, and the fact that when he himself died, assuming Ogre survived the pilot's grisly end, the commune would be down a mech until they could

coerce another pilot from outside the community. They could maintain the war machines, but without proper facilities and available technologies it would be impossible to create new pilots. The process by which the pilots were given bio-port implants was a complex one, and the commune did not have the capability. Always on death's doorstep, Sokol reflected as the captain began to speak, that's life on the list.

"Here are the facts, as they presently stand," Kochi said through his flight helmet, his voice rough with age and hardship, "Life Support had a catastrophic systems failure, the engineers are still trying to pinpoint the exact cause, though initial reports are that several filters had exceeded their capacity and overheated to the point of immolation.

Apparently, the new filters we seized from Praxis Mundi were only enough to meet three quarters of our needs. The immolation started a chain reaction and both failsafe modules were destroyed before they could engage and prevent an atmo breach. When the backup system activated it blew out immediately, causing a second atmo breach. Emergency response specialists are sweeping the commune to help the survivors, and engineers have patched the breaches. So far casualty reports are minimal."

"Sabotage could explain so many things going wrong at once," suggested Gage when Kochi paused to let the facts sink in.

"It is more likely that we just had a run of bad luck," Lelani Ursa disagreed, shaking her head and gesturing to the small chamber around them. "Every bit of tech in this commune is stolen or scavenged. Fiat Lux is held together with parts from a hundred different companies, thousands of makes and models, it was only a matter of time before something like this happened."

"I will not rule out sabotage, Mister Gage, nor will I accept that we are powerless against the particulars of our technological ecosystem, Miss Ursa. That is for the investigators to determine. In the meantime, we must respond," spoke the captain as he rotated his chair and brought up several screens at the front of the chamber, each depicting various star charts of their sector and those adjacent. "Fiat Lux is now living on borrowed time. All remaining breathable reserves are being used to maintain the commune's atmosphere, however, that will not last."

Sokol recognized the familiar schematics of Andromeda Station when Kochi brought it up on the screen. Suddenly the feelings he'd experienced prior to the assault on Marcross flooded Sokol for the second time that day. Kochi sat in silence for a moment, allowing the sight of the station to haunt the screen as the lead swarmer, deck chief, and mech pilot looked on.

“The reality of our situation, whether the culprit is a saboteur or failing tech, is that Fiat Lux is going to suffocate without swift and decisive action,” stated Kochi as he brought up more information about Andromeda Station, displaying the registered systems in place and general traffic trends. “No amount of ship salvage will yield a system as potent as we need, just more reserve breathable that will only temporary stave off the inevitable. Andromeda Station is our answer.”

Silence filled the room with a sort of pressure, each of the leaders considering the image of the station. It was two sectors away, just inside the outermost border of Aegis controlled space. Fiat Lux had survived so long not just because it had a warship, but because, like any good pirate outfit, the ravagers went for targets that had a proper ratio of risk and reward.

Praxis Mundi would never report the attack on PM2258 because it was a dark site, and while they might increase their use of merc patrols and harden their other dark sites in necrospace, there was little threat of reprisal. The same could be said for the various ships that now drifted in the debris field that surrounded Fiat Lux, each one a long hauler, smuggler, pirate, or unlucky Red List vessel that wandered too far from the shipping lanes and into necrospace. To penetrate corporate space and assault an accredited station would never have been something considered by the ravagers were the situation not so desperate. For all their community’s bluster about the false idols of currency, none were so headstrong as to think that they could stand against the greater corporate civilization.

“We have lived successfully on the fringes of corporate power for a long time,” said Kochi as he watched the reactions on the faces of his leaders, his permanent life aboard the ship not impeding his captain’s sense of the crew. “The prey we take is logged as acceptable losses on the balance sheets of the Anointed Actuaries, our piracy part of the cost of doing business out here in the black.”

“Hitting Andromeda Station will change everything,” insisted Lelani Ursa, crossing her arms and taking a deep breath before continuing. “It might be a border station, but it’ll be populated by accredited citizens of many corporations.”

“The capitalists will not allow this to go unanswered,” said Gage while he looked at the schematics, clearly forming a swarmer breaching plan even as he spoke. “They’ll harden their picket lines, maybe start sending long haulers in convoys, put cor-sec frigates on deep patrol duty. Long-term survival will become more difficult, and forgive me, Captain, but the *Fatalis* will not always be with us.”

“Nothing to forgive, Mister Gage, the facts stand as they are. We need their life support to keep the commune alive in short order.

Whatever consequences result later from our bid for life now, will have to be contended with as they come," responded Kochi as he toggled the screens to highlight the location and specs of the stations primary life support system. "This information is outdated, as records for border stations such as this are somewhat unreliable, especially considering what little of the corporate network we can access. With that in mind, you will all be expected to formulate alternative tactics once we make contact."

"We will need to double the deck staff to get this done swiftly, Captain," said Lelani Ursa, her cold demeanor matching the frozen mood in the room as she turned to Sokol. "And I'll need two mech pilots to operate the loaders. I'll rig the loaders for hard duty, give them an output boost, too. They're cores will meltdown quickly, so we'll lose them in the action but they'll be able to get the system into our hold before they go."

"Do I have it right that you just warned me I might lose two pilots to unpredictable, and yet, certain core failures?" asked Sokol, his tone reproachful, "If it's a suicide op, just say it."

"We have to get the prime life support module and the filter tower onto the *Fatalis* in the middle of a raid, possibly in zero-G conditions. If that doesn't happen, Fiat Lux is done," snapped Lelani Ursa, not accustomed to dissent, even from the combat operators. "You can place the fate of our community in the hands of a couple of my deck jockeys or veteran mech pilots."

"Point taken, Chief," Sokol said quickly as he held his hands up. "Gregory and Angron are used to the bigger models, you'll have your pilots."

"I can see several good breaching points, Captain," pointed out Gage, his attention having never wavered from the schematics, his demeanor unfazed by the pending doom they were about to unleash upon Andromeda. "If we launch at near point-blank range, the storm barges can break the hull without an overt risk to the target materials."

"Proximity will not be an issue," Kochi assured Gage as he turned his pilot's throne with but a mental command, the pilot's body not moving a muscle. "My time is growing short, as you say, though according to available information my performance has only degraded by ten percent since my last official review, before the collapse mutiny. *Fatalis* will see it done."

"In that case, once we breach, I see at least four choke points that we'll need to control." Gage turned to Lelani Ursa. "How long we can give you to make the acquisition depends on the alacrity and ferocity of the station's defenders. Port Authority will have a full cadre of corsec troopers ready to respond, and there's no telling how many armed

civilians might step up."

"If we knock out their gravity drive that will certainly cause chaos and reduce their response time," said Sokol pointing to the large compartment containing the station's artificial gravity generator. "The Coyote class mechs can cope with void deployment, so we can move up the hull and hit it on the bounce as we move to the station's main deck. That's where most people will be, especially if we arrive during a shift change, say early night cycle. They'll be forced to deal with us simultaneously. If we make enough of an entrance it could siphon off the bulk of the defenders."

"All fine ideas. I expect a full analysis of data available and tactical proposals from each of you in transit," said Kochi as he turned back to his instruments, "That will be enough for now, dismissed."

The group went silent again, each considering the atrocity they were about to commit, and each of them finding the resolve to see it done. Sokol had killed more people than he could count, and he had stopped trying years ago. The life of a Fiat Lux ravager was a violent one, and beyond those rare few who joined the commune either from raids or happenstance, no outsiders were permitted to survive encounters with *Fatalis*. It was for this reason that the warship was something like a ghost story, a legendary predator lurking in necrospace, and Fiat Lux remained hidden.

We are just names on the Red List, unknown whereabouts and ignored on the fringes of space, where neglect is our ally, mused Sokol, as he considered their predicament, and we are about to appear from the darkness as hungry as we've ever been. He felt a sort of pity for the people of Andromeda Station, whose only sin was having a functioning life support system and existing close enough for the ravagers to reach them and return in time to save the commune. Brutal as this was about to be, there was a kind of desperate glory to it that filled him with a fierce sense of pride in his community.

While other groups might debate the moral ramifications of the proposed mission, or wrestle with the notion of taking the life of one community to preserve another, the people of Fiat Lux were nothing if not pragmatic. Every person in the commune had blood on their hands one way or the other, and it made sense to Sokol that they were part of the hideous Red List. On the drift, castoffs or runaways of the corporate system, living in the black where every day was a battle, whether that was against the elements or other people.

Fiat Lux had survived this long by becoming the largest predator in its immediate environment, only now that wasn't enough, now they had to rise up and take from the feed hand that turned away from them.

Why should the Red Listers be expected to lay down and die

while the corporatists cling to life, Sokol asked himself rhetorically, when they possessed the power to stand up for themselves?

12. HARD UNIVERSE

The journey back to Andromeda Station had been completed without incident, and as Rhett attached a mooring cable to the outside of the bounty ship he was thankful to see it finished. They may not have had to fight for this haul, but everyone had felt the same oppressive dread when they were aboard the craft. It wasn't so much that people had fought and died on board, that was common enough that most of the scrappers had little concern for such things. It was more about the unknown quality of the ship, as if the angles inside the craft were all wrong, as if a hostile and corrupting energy emanated from the very bones of the vessel. Strangely, it reminded Rhett of a convict he'd encountered during his time in the penal colony.

The man had been unassuming enough, looking much like the other convicts with his laser burned, hairless body and paper jumpsuit, and yet there was an energy about him that put everyone off. Some rumors whispered that he was a mass murderer, others that he was some kind of war criminal, and even others that he was a sexual predator. The man never spoke of his past, which was typical for the convicts of the colony and somewhat frowned upon by the enforcers at any rate, and that unknown made the sense of unease even worse. The man later died during a loader malfunction, and neither the convicts nor the enforcers did much to investigate the death, so relieved were all that whatever he had been was now gone.

Rhett thought of him every time he looked at the unnamed slave ship, and he was more than happy to be very nearly rid of the cursed thing. The yard master would now be finalizing the handoff forms with Captain Estrada, and within a few days the first bounty deposit would be paid to the *Six*. They'd get the rest of the reward once the ship was recovered by the client, which meant that it could sit in the dock for weeks before someone came to collect it. However, considering the size of the reward, Rhett doubted it would be more than a few days before someone arrived. Nobody would pay what had been offered and let the ship linger.

"I hope whoever put up the bounty for this collects soon," said John as he locked in his mooring and clomped over the hull to where Rhett finished his work. "I've seen a few death ships in my day, but this one is bad news. Spend enough years on the job and you get that sense of things, I'm sure you know what I mean. I'd happily take a wreck full of angry squatters or pirates over this thing."

"The AG16 was as bad as its been in a long time, but at least you can sort of feel better about it once the tech officer gives you some insight into what happened," agreed Rhett as the two of them moved

across the hull back to the ladder that would lead them into the crew deck area of the giant orbital ring that was the scrap yard. “Bio-hazards, toxic waste, desperate scavengers, that sort of thing you can face directly and overcome. Whatever happened on that ship, whatever cargo they were carrying, left something behind.”

“Grotto people are about as pragmatic as it gets, but every now and then you meet a salvage marine who ended up believing in ghosts,” said John as he stood aside to allow Rhett to climb the ladder ahead of him. “After this, I think I can see how that could happen.”

“All I know is that I’m not booking a room that has a view of the scrap yard,” Rhett stated as he ascended the ladder. He paused as he saw several tiny flashes in the distant darkness, well away from the lights of the station, “Did you see that?”

“I did,” breathed John, stopping at the base of the ladder, “Looked like...”

“Incoming!” boomed the voice of Captain Estrada over the main channel, “*Brace for impact!”*

As the captain spoke, Rhett could see the sharp thruster illumination of three void torpedoes as they streaked past the scrap yard and slammed into Andromeda Station. In an instant three powerful explosions tore gaping holes in the station.

At least two of them seemed to have each struck one of the handful of defensive batteries that served as a basic deterrent for pirates. The station’s short range guns weren’t enough to ward off a determined military grade opponent, but they were generally rated to be enough of a threat to lone pirate vessels that the armed scavengers kept well away. As the station continued its turn spinward, Rhett could see that the third torpedo had severely damaged the main docking bay of the station. As he watched, several smaller ships burst out of the bay, burning hard and not caring what further damage they caused by going full ignition from inside the bay.

In the blink of an eye, someone out there in the darkness had reduced the defensive grid by half and grounded most of the ships that were already docked. Two more that were in waiting cut sharply and sped away from the station. Rhett was keenly aware that had this attack come much later it would be the *Vulture Six* down there in the wreckage.

“Calibos, get your people back to the ship!” ordered Estrada, the sound of his voice prompting Rhett to turn away from the station and towards where *Vulture Six* hung in the void just above the scrap yard ring.

Rhett and John scampered up the ladder as Doak appeared from the other side of the ship. Once Rhett reached the airlock he opened it and turned to give John a hand. The former trooper pulled the marine

up and into the airlock, then he looked down to where Doak appeared at the bottom of the ladder. In the distance, far behind his team member, Rhett could see a looming shape begin to take form, a ship of some kind, and not a small one either.

Doak deactivated his mag-clamps and gathered his legs underneath him before pushing off hard from the hull of the cursed slave ship. He kept his fingers gently riding the edges of the ladder and in the zero gravity environment was able to clear the length of the ladder in seconds. Rhett felt the ring shake as he watched Doak rushing towards him, He could see the flash of some kind of mounted gun on the ship begin to fire. Doak slammed into Rhett's open arms, slowing the cutter's momentum with his own body as John slammed the airlock hatch shut and the ring shuddered again with multiple impacts.

"That's the warship, *Fatalis*!" breathed Vitrian over the channel as the wicked vessel filled Rhett's vision through the wide viewports of the yard's observation deck. The three men rushed across the sealed gangplank that led towards the temporary mooring tube that connected the yard's circular form to the main hatch of the *Six*.

Rhett stopped at the hatch, looking out at the station while John keyed in the commands to gain entry. The hatch pressurized and slid open, yet the three of them stood silently as the grim ship launched another fusillade of what Rhett could now see was railgun fire slicing through one of the housing decks. Rhett could see furniture and bodies tumbling out of the rents in the station along with debris from the impact and rapid decompression. The initial cluster of torpedoes had already taken out the handful of defensive batteries maintained by Port Authority, and without a cor-sec frigate on hand to draw fire, the station was at the mercy of the attacking ship.

"Seal us up and strap in people, we're cutting the cord," said Captain Estrada. No sooner had the three men closed the airlock behind than the joining seals blew as Vitrian disconnected from the ring.

Doak and John rushed through the bay and deeper into the ship, presumably to find a secure position, as any second now *Vulture Six* would be screaming through empty space and away from the sudden attack. Rhett started to follow them, then stopped, his gaze falling upon the weapons rack embedded into the launch bay's wall. Before he realized what he was doing, the former trooper strode to the rack slid his access peg into the slot and turned it, opening the sealed cover of the rack.

Rhett drew down his usual compact assault rifle, slapped in a fresh magazine, and then began filling the empty slots on his chest and thighs with additional magazines.

“Calibos, what are you doing?” said Captain Estrada in the bounty scrapper’s comm-bead, “We’re going full burn, get strapped in!”

“I have to do something, Andromeda is under attack, sir!” spoke Rhett as he clenched and unclenched his hand several times, somewhat involuntarily, before he pulled a semi-automatic sidearm out of the rack and slid it into the holster at his waist.

“The station is done, Calibos, the best thing we can do for ourselves is get clear while the *Fatalis* is focused on Andromeda,” said the captain, and Rhett could hear it in the man’s voice that it was costing him something to give the order to leave, as Estrada too had taken a liking to their home berth after so many years, “The *Six* has to come first.”

“You aren’t wrong, sir, you should go, but I have to do this,” said Rhett as he closed the rack and walked briskly over to the control panel that would allow him to enter the airlock and begin his descent towards the station, though as he punched in his activation code he saw that the panel had been locked down remotely from the pilot’s deck.

“One man with a rifle isn’t going to change anything, Calibos,” the captain snapped.

“Captain Estrada, with all due respect, sir, if you do not open the hatch I will shoot the panel and pry it open myself,” growled Rhett after punching in his activation code once more, the blood pounding in his head as he stepped back and raised his rifle to point it at the panel.

“You know I cannot willfully endanger company assets without an open bounty on file, we just closed the slave ship not five minutes ago,” retorted the captain, his usually commanding voice noticeably weary from the exchange. “We have no mandate to protect Andromeda Station, and if I authorize deployment, then as captain I would be in violation of Fleet Profitability Protocol 17. We could lose the *Six*.”

“Calibos, why risk it?” added Vitrian, his question filling Rhett’s comm-bead as the former trooper looked up to see Quinn enter the launch bay alongside the fully armed and armored forms of Dante and Drago.

Quinn quietly walked over to the control panel, popped off the frame with a swift application of her multi-tool, and began tinkering with the guts of the device.

The twins came to stand on either side of Rhett, neither of them speaking. Rhett had never seen them bedecked with so much firepower, and at first he couldn’t fathom why they would wish to join him on his reckless endeavor, until he noticed the tiny Fenrir logo emblazoned on Drago’s combo-weapon.

They couldn't care less about the ravagers, he realized, or the station, for the twins it was about the action. It was this infatuation with the tools of the gun trade that made Fenrir cults incompatible with civilized society, and yet time after time Rhett found himself thankful to be in the company of such men, twisted as their worldview might be. As if in answer to Rhett's silent question Drago turned his face towards the former trooper and smiled as he made a show of tapping the logo with his finger.

"Holt already has the engines cooking, he'll burn any second now," said Quinn to the three armored men as she activated the hatch door, looking rather pleased with herself as the doors slid open to reveal the airlock. "If the station falls, this is a one-way trip."

"*Eros! Dante! Drago! Stand down!*" ordered Captain Estrada through the team channel. "We're Vultures, there is no anti-piracy commission in our credentials, this will go on all our records! That means a heavier indenture sentence at best. Dante and Drago might even get purged!"

"Understood, Captain," said Rhett as he and the twins stepped through the door into the airlock. While Quinn sealed the hatch behind them, the former trooper and the former cultists secured their weapons for zero-G deployment.

"*Calibos!*" said the captain once more before the airlock doors threw themselves open at Quinn's command and the three men launched themselves through it, kicking off hard from the deck and using their body thrusters to add to the slight decompression of the chamber.

The instant the armored men hit void, the pilot of *Vulture Six* ignited the engine, sending the scrapper vessel rocketing out of its mooring and away from the embattled station. Andromeda Station loomed before Rhett, this rare occasion to see it from the outside giving him temporary pause in consideration of it. The Tardis system had been home for a long time, even when he was in prison, and yet this station, this lonely hunk of metal and atmosphere drifting on the borders of space, had taken root in his psyche.

I have moved through much of the last decade on the drift, he thought as he used the thrusters to alter his trajectory so that he was hurtling towards the main deck. At least here I have found something resembling peace. The thought of ravagers tearing through the station made his adrenaline surge, and he marveled at how attached he'd actually become. Why the enemy had come, what they might be after, meant little to him, only that they must be pushed back.

"I like it here," said Rhett over the main channel, very nearly laughing at himself at how simple his motivations seemed compared to the vastness of the human experience, "I can't let them have

Andromeda without a fight."

Vulture Six kept flying in the other direction, putting more and more distance between the *Six* and the conflict unfolding in and around Andromeda Station. As Rhett and the twins neared the spinning cylinder that was the exterior of the main deck, they could see the ghastly damage that had been dealt to the aft sections. On the spinward side of the station he could make out the dark outline of the warship *Fatalis*, sailing perilously close to the main deck, indicating that the ship had a pilot more skilled and daring than even Vitrian, who was certainly the most cavalier stick jockey Rhett had ever known.

"Copy, Calibos," said Vitrian through the comm-bead after a moment, and Rhett could almost hear the young man smiling at what must seem like reckless bravado on Rhett's part. "Good hunting."

Rhett could see several of the ragged holes torn in the hull of the station, some of them plugged by what appeared to be low grade troop transports, the kind usually favored by the various pirates and ravagers that hunted in the black. The *Fatalis* was something out of legend, and the talk painted the warship as a ghost from the bloody initial days of the Wageri Diaspora, when the once great corporation lost a trade war and tore itself apart in defeat. Already, he'd witnessed enough firepower put on display by the ravager ship to call the legends true, though what they could possibly want with the station remained a mystery. This was an accredited station, and had the official, even if not overly functional, protection of Aegis Corporation. Attacking the station would put the *Fatalis* on every hit list the company had, though Rhett knew as well as anyone that once the *Fatalis* finished its grisly work here it would likely disappear once more into the black.

Rhett turned his thrusters and slowed his approach so that he could activate his mag-clamps and land near a maintenance access hatch without too tough a landing. The twins made it stationside seconds after he did, and Rhett was thankful for their presence. No doubt the cultists had begun gearing up moments after the attack, and Rhett considered that it was likely they'd been actively hoping that something like this would happen. For now, he was happy to have them on his side, not that he had any clue what he was going to do. They were three men armed with rifles and pistols, so there was little they could do against a battle-hardened warship, but they had to do something.

"If the ship wanted to kill the station they'd have just stayed at distance and torpedoed Andromeda into oblivion," observed Rhett aloud as he activated the maintenance hatch, pleased with himself for having successfully argued with the captain in favor of fleet paying for

all the scrappers on the *Six* to have maintenance upgrades on their station access profiles. “The shooters on those barges are either after something specific or they’re trying to seize the whole station. All we can do is push them back and hope that warship leaves without blowing us up out of spite.”

“It is unlikely that they intend to allow Andromeda to survive regardless, and so our actions will be of little consequence,” observed Dante as he moved through the sliding door of the hatch behind Rhett. “But guns speak loudly, yes? They will have to listen for at least a while.”

“Fair enough,” nodded Rhett as he led the cultist through the maintenance tunnel, knowing from his study of the station and occasional use of the tunnels that they burrowed across the entire station. The circulation system of Andromeda allowed maintenance crews to move people and equipment without disrupting the day to day routine of life aboard the station.

Rhett sprinted down the tunnel, remembering that he had several more left turns and at least one more ladder with a hatch in between him and the station’s main deck. If all the barges struck near engineering then no doubt, the boarders were trying to seize control of the station’s vital systems. Based on the time of the night cycle, Rhett knew that nearly forty percent of the station’s population would be in the main deck, perhaps even fifty since it was just after shift change. He knew that from a tactical perspective, Dante was correct, and there was little they could do with rifles from inside the station. Even if they could kill or drive out the boarders, there would still be a warship out there in the void ready to hit them with more torpedoes. At least if that happened, thought Rhett as he turned left and then left again, he could die standing for something more than a bounty reward.

He couldn’t place why exactly that was suddenly so important, and yet the former trooper felt as if he were winning back a long dead part of himself. He pounded up the ladder towards main deck and knew that no matter how the next few minutes unfolded, he was doing what needed to be done. It was rare indeed that a man could be righteous, thought Rhett as he opened the small hatch so that he could leap down onto the floor plating of one of the lower levels of main deck.

He was going to make the most of it.

The main deck was packed with people and they were all surging in different directions, a general panic having set in to create a chaotic press of bodies. The three armored men pushed and shoved their way to an observation patio.

Rhett gripped the rails as he looked up and down the main deck,

taking in the environment and assessing the tactical reality of his situation. He could see a squad of Port Authority cor-sec troopers plowing through the crowd, heading towards the rising sound of gunfire below deck.

"The ravagers are likely attempting to seize and hold choke points," observed Dante. He pointed towards the troopers as the squad broke into two smaller groups and moved to enter separate hatches that led down to the engineering core of the station. "The security checkpoints that keep out drunks and traders will have little effect on boarders coming up through engineering."

"Well, let's get down there and do what we can," Rhett said before gripping the railing and heaving himself over it, making hard landing on the patio beneath them.

The twins followed and in moments the three armored men caught up to the last cor-sec trooper as the young man, likely on his first rotation by Rhett's estimation, rushed through an open hatch. With the twins in tow, Rhett caught up to the trooper, who turned and tried to raise his weapon against the bounty scrapper.

"Easy, kid, we're here to help," said Rhett as he swiftly extended his arm to grip the trooper's weapon and pin it firmly against the young man's chest, "Bounty scrappers from *Vulture Six*."

"Right, okay then, well," stammered the young trooper as he took in the sight of Rhett and the twins. He took a few steps back and then continued down the hallway. "Pirates have taken engineering, but they aren't advancing. Nobody's sure what they want."

"Doesn't matter, we have to dislodge them before they accomplish whatever it is," said Rhett as the group raced down the corridor.

The sounds of screaming and shooting were deafening in the tight confines of the network of corridors and checkpoints that surrounded the engineering deck. Rhett followed the young trooper to a checkpoint that had been taken by the boarders and got his first glimpse of the enemy. They were far better equipped and armored than average space pirates, though, given that the boarding party had launched from the likes of the *Fatalis* that was no surprise. What did strike Rhett as odd, was that the boarders were not advancing, choosing instead to hold the checkpoint against cor-sec.

The checkpoint itself was simply a few flimsy mobile barricades and a plexiglass guard shack. The checkpoints only existed to provide basic security for the engineering deck, to manage traffic and make sure that only authorized individuals entered. Rhett's gaze swept the area before he ducked back into cover around the corner of the corridor. He took note of the handful of dead cor-sec troopers already littering the corridor and the checkpoint. The sounds of shooting

weren't just in this section, and Rhett guessed that Dante was right, and every checkpoint had been seized. The cor-sec presence on Andromeda was thin as it was, now with such a sudden and fierce assault they were likely down to only sixty or seventy percent strength.

"Bring up the breaching shields!" shouted a cor-sec trooper that Rhett recognized as the proctor of the unit. From behind the twins came another group of four troopers, each of them carrying the massive, wide shields that were often used for shipboard combat. "*Fall in, troopers!*"

Rhett moved to join the ranks of the cor-sec troopers as they formed a tight wedge of riflemen behind the protection of the shield bearers. As he stepped up to stand shoulder to shoulder with the young trooper they'd met in the corridor the proctor grabbed Rhett by the arm.

"We don't need help from a bunch of ragtag bounty scrappers," growled the proctor as he firmly pressed against Rhett, making the former trooper step back, "Cor-sec has this under control."

"Sir, we could use every gun we can get," piped up the young trooper.

"This is Rhett Calibos, lost his badge after the Dunhill Massacre. Aegis pulled him out of some Rubicon penal colony and stuck him on a Vulture ship. Those two are Fenrir cultists and they aren't even trying to hide it. You don't think Port Authority knows who you people are?" the proctor snapped at the young man before turning back to Rhett and the twins. "You want to do something useful then get yourselves back to the main deck and away from the combat zone! Let the professionals handle this!"

Rhett stood in stunned silence, then stepped back further as the proctor called for the formation to advance. As soon as the men with the breaching shields rounded the corner their equipment shuddered with multiple impacts. It took all the strength they could muster to push forward, aided in this by the men behind them. The breaching shields were stout indeed, though not invincible, and Rhett knew that if the troopers couldn't put the boarders on the run soon, the shields would fail. The shields had gun ports in the front, and the throaty growl of the short-barreled shotguns carried by the shield bearers filled the corridor.

There were perhaps a dozen troopers who filed into the corridor and it was clear from the sound of the fighting, that the boarders were throwing everything they had at the advancing formation.

Several more troopers shouldered past the bounty scrappers and Rhett wondered if similar scenes were playing out at each of the checkpoints. If that was the case, then nearly every cor-sec trooper on

the station would be engaged in the fight for engineering. That meant that the rest of the station would be defenseless if another boarding party entered from a different section.

Rhett was shaking with fury as he turned away from the fighting and stomped back down the corridor towards the main deck, though whether that fury was directed at the proctor or himself he could not tell. He had been laid bare by the proctor's words, the cor-sec leader having known just how to hurt the scrapper with simple words. He and the rest of the crew of the *Six*, other than Captain Estrada and Vitrian Holt, were all criminals and debtors of one kind or another.

When the *Vulture Six* docked on the station it was easy for Rhett to forget who he was, and since he had money to spend, the people of the station didn't seem to care or want to know, anyway. It made sense that the Port Authority would have been provided with detailed profiles of the bounty scrappers, else they'd never have allowed the *Vulture Six* to have a permanent berth on Andromeda Station.

He had not expected to be turned away from the fight, the proctor's classism having taken him quite by surprise. It seemed that even in the heat of battle some prejudices were so ingrained that they expressed themselves regardless.

Rhett moved out to the bottom of the main deck, where many people still lingered, unsure of where to run, making Rhett realize that many of them might not realize that some of the housing decks had been strafed with rail gun fire.

"We were not the only individuals rising up," said Dante suddenly as he pointed towards the upper levels of main deck.

As Rhett followed the man's gesture, he saw that several dozen armed civilians were making their way down towards them even as the horribly out of place sound of a heavy machine gun boomed in the corridor they'd just left, "And their timing is good."

More shooting filled the corridor behind them suddenly, and it was closer than it should have been. Drago turned and just as he did several cor-sec troopers pounded around the corner. The large man stepped out of the way and the young trooper that had led them to the fight in the first place sped past him. Behind the young man were five other troopers, and a sixth who was suddenly riddled with bullets from deeper into the corridor.

"It would appear that battle has found us regardless of our social class," smiled Dante as he thumbed the safety off of his combo-weapon.

Rhett did the same and took note of the armed civilians gathering around the beleaguered cor-sec troopers. He shook his head, clearing the cobwebs of doubt and shame from his mind, and realized that many of the civilians were looking at him expectantly. The cor-sec

troopers were only barely keeping themselves from retreating further. Rhett imagined that the sight of he and the twins with their full kit gave the impression of authority. They might not have the social status or the legal clout, but in the heat of the moment it seemed that the would-be defenders were prepared to take their orders from the scrappers.

"They had a mounted gun hidden behind the checkpoint," sputtered the young cor-sec trooper as he fell to his knees on the floor plating near Rhett. The scrapper could see several places where bullets had battered their way through the young man's armor. "Waited for us to bunch up behind the shields. Who would use heavy weapons on a station? Probably punched through the hull in a few places."

"Ravagers," said Dante as he held his weapon at the ready, pointing it down the corridor that now seemed even more menacing, "They have no concern for maintaining hull integrity."

"You see anything coming out of that corridor you fill it with holes!" bellowed Rhett at the armed civilians, and to his surprise they responded by moving forward and taking up firing positions across the lower deck as even more of them descended from the main deck.

No sooner had he given that most basic of orders than several of the ravager boarders rounded the corner and opened fire on the assembled defenders. Two civilians who had not yet found cover were instantly cut down.

Dante unleashed fire from his combo-weapon and butchered one of the boarders, then a second, before the rest of them could start scampering back into cover as they sprayed bullets indiscriminately into the lower deck.

Rhett had his rifle to his shoulder and punched several rounds through the chest and neck of one of the boarders who had not reacted quickly enough, too focused on hosing down a third civilian with lethal projectiles.

Drago's combo-weapon lent its voice to the exchange, and another boarder went down with shredded body armor and his blood pouring out of several holes.

Rhett pulled the stock of his compact rifle tight into his shoulder and continued to fire, sacrificing accuracy for a free hand, which he used to drag the wounded young cor-sec trooper into cover. Once he had the young man secured, he took careful aim and peppered a boarder with bracketing fire driving the enemy into Dante's hungry gunsights, wherein the boarder's body was torn apart by the cultist's devastatingly accurate shots. Rhett peered down his iron sights and saw that the corridor before them was now empty, the boarders having pulled back, presumably to their checkpoint, after their counter-attack had been blunted.

Rhett looked behind him at the assembled defenders, happy that his helmet partially obscured his face so that they would not see the scowl that covered it. Not a single civilian had fired in the brief, but fierce exchange. It was a sobering reminder that though they were eager to help, none of them had the skills or discipline that would make them equals in battle to the likes of the ravagers. He looked down at the young cor-sec trooper and saw that at some point in the firefight the young man had expired.

Rhett cursed and started moving cautiously out of cover and towards Dante's position, hoping to give himself more of a firing advantage in case the enemy attempted to press the attack. He knew that they couldn't just hunker down in the lower deck forever, sooner or later someone was going to have to go back in there. Then, before he could consider the meat grinder that such an action would result in, Rhett felt the entire main deck shake violently.

At first, he thought it was another torpedo attack, until Rhett realized that he was beginning to float away from the floor plating. The civilians started shouting and Rhett cast his gaze upwards through the main deck. Someone had destroyed the gravity drive and in an instant, the station's most bustling center of activity was choked with floating debris and panicking civilians.

Plenty of people had either been attempting to hole up in the various shops and upon the gangplank of the main deck, in addition to the armed group that had gathered with him at the bottom, and all of them were now on the drift.

Rhett immediately engaged his mag-clamps, and he was still close enough to the floor plate that his boots drew him the several inches back down to solid ground.

Dante and Drago had done the same, though neither of them were looking up, both staring intently at the corridor which was now filled with the floating corpses of boarders and troopers. The cultists opened fire again, their salvo tearing into the tangle of bodies, and through the chaos Rhett caught sight of several boarders that had taken the sudden change in gravity as a chance to press into the lower deck.

Rhett raised his rifle to assist when an explosion rocked the deck. He looked up to see something he had never dreamed possible. Two mech warriors, smaller and more wickedly agile than he'd known existed, emerged from the great hole they'd blasted in the top tier of main deck.

The great cylindrical deck was the largest single atmospheric compartment in Andromeda Station. There was no real way to seal it if the hull was breached. That was a necessary design flaw in the Gamma Pattern orbital stations manufactured by the Aegis corporation. To build the stations as affordably as possible, it was a

flaw that had been deemed acceptable. Sectioning off the main deck would have required much more raw material tonnage and many more labor hours, an unacceptable and deemed unnecessary expense, so it was simply left open. This cost saving design allowed Aegis to maintain a vast array of stations across its borders, stimulating trade to a high degree while exposing the populace to an acceptable risk.

Rhett had not heard stories of main decks suffering from hull breaches, so it had never occurred to him to consider what might happen if that was the case. He had also never thought that ravagers would dare attack an accredited station. The size of the hole was sickening, and instantly the cavernous chamber began to depressurize as all of the vital atmosphere began venting into space.

The mech warriors opened fire with heavy mounted weapons even as they used their hideous, sharp claws and onboard thrusters to move downwards despite the storm of bodies and debris that rushed upwards and out the breach. The main deck was tremendous, so it would take several minutes for the entire area to vent, but in that time hundreds would die. Rhett snapped his rifle to his shoulder and squeezed the trigger, knowing before it happened that his bullets would ricochet off the stout armor of the mechs.

He watched for a moment as the mechs moved, seeing how they used their onboard thrusters to propel them back and forth across the great chasm of open space between one side of main deck and the other. They were focusing their fire, Rhett realized, on the airlocks and maintenance hatches that would protect other decks from their assault. They were here to kill the station, to rip the beating heart out of Andromeda. There just wasn't enough firepower or able fighters still active to push back against the boarders and resist the mech warriors.

One of the mechs, a vicious looking beast painted matte black and sporting a plasma lance on each arm, slagged an airlock someone had managed to shut just before decompression. Some unfortunate station dweller was sucked out of the burning opening where the hatch had been moments before and sent soaring towards the hole in the top of the main deck.

"Dante!" shouted Rhett through their team channel as he pointed at the mechs, "Go for the thrusters! They won't be able to stabilize if we knock them out before the entire deck depressurizes."

"Send them out the hole they came through," laughed Drago, his voice nearly unfamiliar to Rhett, as the man only very rarely spoke.

The twins nodded at each other and deactivated their mag-clamps before pushing off hard, sending themselves soaring upwards towards the mechs as the brutal war machines worked their way methodically downwards.

Rhett turned and fired his compact rifle at two boarders who had entered the lower deck. His rounds connected with one of the ravagers, but the man's armor protected him from the first of the shots and Rhett was forced to rush for cover as the man returned fire. The ravager was armed with a needle rifle, likely of Rubicon manufacture, just like the one Rhett had used during his time in cor-sec, and Rhett felt the sting of several projectiles piercing his armor.

Rhett crashed through the front door of Tae Mae's as a cloud of needles chased him. The former trooper attempted to roll onto his feet, but in the zero gravity it was awkward and he ended up plowing through a table and chair set instead. His rifle went soaring out of his grasp and he scrambled for his pistol as the boarder leapt into the tiny restaurant. Tae Mae appeared from behind the bar, her face obscured by a re-breather system that had to be as old as she was, however, the chopped down double slug thrower in her hands was polished and new.

She fired both barrels and sent two high velocity slugs of max-density alloy at the border. The slugs shattered the low-grade body armor covering the man's chest, and the sheer power of the rounds sent him reeling backwards. The boarder had his mag-clamps engaged, and so instead of his whole body sailing away from the impact his knees buckled and his torso slammed down hard against the floor plating. Blood spewed from him, and it was impossible to tell if he'd died from the slugs themselves or the sheer blunt force trauma of being hit from the front and back in rapid succession.

Rhett rose to a crouching position and started firing with his pistol, going more by instinct than anything else, certain that the other ravager was pressing the attack. Indeed, Rhett's feeling was correct, and no sooner had he started squeezing the trigger than the ravager burst through the shower of blood streaming from his comrade and into the tiny restaurant. The ravager was already firing, and several of his needles buried themselves in Tae Mae's shoulder and chest even though sustained fire from Rhett altered his trajectory. The ravager, now dead from several lethal pistol rounds, careened into the low end of the bar and then began to gently drift.

Rhett rushed to his feet and recovered his rifle. The sounds of battle were loud enough to reach his ears despite the rush of air from the deck decompression. He turned to see Tae Mae still alive, working her way to the back room, presumably to shut herself in. With her re-breather and the heavy shawl, he saw her snatch up to bring with her, Rhett figured she would survive for at least a few hours once the main deck was fully decompressed. The air would keep her breathing, and the shawl would fight the cold for at least a little while. Hopefully, she had a few heat packs stashed somewhere. Not that it would matter if

the ravagers torpedoed the station. Rhett shouldered his rifle and left the restaurant.

Rhett walked right into a firefight. The remaining Port Authority cor-sec troopers and a handful of civilians were shooting it out with boarders pouring out from the corridor.

The cor-sec troopers had recovered some modicum of discipline and were firing in tight bursts, doing their best to keep the boarders on the defensive. The civilians were all long-haulers, still wearing their mag-clamps, and though their pistols were small caliber and somewhat inaccurately fired, the added salvos of hard rounds helped keep the boarders from advancing. It wouldn't last, Rhett knew, in moments the defenders would have to re-load, and that's when the boarders would rush them on full-auto.

The bounty scrapper flexed his hand over the grip of his rifle and was about to enter the fray when another explosion from above rocked the deck. He glanced upwards and saw that the black mech had slagged another airlock. He was dimly aware of a furious exchange of fire unfolding above the mech as the twins engaged the other intruder, though his attention snapped back to the freshly ruined airlock as a familiar body tumbled out.

Andromeda raked her hands across the corrugated gangplank as she desperately sought purchase. Her fingertips were raw and bloody in seconds as the decompression drug her across the floor. She struggled desperately against it, only to lose her grip and soar upwards. The table girl hurled through the open deck for several meters before she managed to thrust her hands outwards and grip the railing of the next deck. The young woman happened to look down and saw Rhett standing several levels below her. The former trooper knew she recognized him despite his armor and helmet.

"*Bossman!*" she shouted down at him, though in the rush of decompression he could only read the word on her lips, before her fingers slipped and she sailed up towards the ragged hole at the top of the main deck.

The gun fell from Rhett's hands and would have flown up to join the table girl had it not been strapped to his armor. The scrapper crouched low, gathering his legs underneath him as his awareness of events slowed to near stillness. Rhett deactivated his mag-clamps and launched himself upwards, the power of his legs combining with his body thrusters to propel him with tremendous speed.

Above him Dante and Drago were putting the teachings of the Fenrir gun cults on full display. They had known the feel of the trigger before they could stand, having been born into the cult before it had been purged. The boys knew the names of every weapon manufactured by humanity and recognized its voice when it spoke.

Now, as adults, they carried those same weapons they'd been raised to worship. On paper, it was for the profit of Aegis corporation, for them, it was for the glory of the guns themselves. The gun, as they'd told Rhett once, was the only pure thing in this scrapyard of a universe. To the men and women of the cult, there was nothing more honest than a gun fulfilling its purpose.

The black mech that had blown out the airlocks hung in the air at the center of the main deck, its onboard thrusters holding it down against the rush of decompression. The mech spun in a circle as it clumsily attempted to track the twins.

Dante had engaged his mag-clamps and was running along the thin edge of the gangplank, the lack of gravity enabling him to defy the architecture of the station as he sprinted across it to attack his enemy on the horizontal. The cultist's combo-weapon was on full-auto as he fired down at the mech. His brother, Drago, ran in the opposite direction across the main deck, the two of them punishing the mech with bullets.

Rhett streaked towards Andromeda as she tumbled through the air above him. He narrowly avoided being bisected by a shot from the mech's plasma lance as he sailed through the firefight in progress. Dante released the trigger just before Rhett sped past them. Drago switched from small arms to a slug thrower and used a well-placed shot to divert the mech's plasma lance away from Rhett.

As Rhett continued upwards, the mech attempted to adjust its fire by raising one lance towards him as it spewed plasma wildly with its other lance at where Drago had been moments before.

The change in targets proved to be a fatal mistake.

As the mech fired the lance at Rhett's rapidly ascending form Drago took the opening to launch himself at the war machine. Dante opened fire again, this time having slung his combo-weapon and now brandishing two heavy caliber pistols.

The mech's pilot was distracted by the potent impacts of the heavy bullets. While not enough to damage the beast, it did prove sufficient to knock out several onboard thrusters and damage the feeder line to its left plasma lance, shutting the weapon down, leaving the mech without any functional firepower.

Heedless of the debris and mechs, Rhett focused only on Andromeda, narrowing the gap between them with blinding speed as his thrusters carried him with the rush of decompression. He passed the other mech warrior as it rushed downwards. The war machine abandoned its destruction of the airlocks, ignored Rhett, and moved to engage the twins.

Andromeda caught sight of Rhett as he sped to her. She turned her body to face him while she opened her arms wide.

The hole was just behind her, and Rhett had no idea what he was going to do once he reached her, only that he had to.

The scrapper slammed into the table girl and they wrapped their arms around each other in a desperate and crushing embrace. They hit void the next instant, and Rhett moved to reverse his body thrusters, hoping with everything he had that they had not fully exhausted their boost capacity.

Drago soared across the open air and engaged his mag-clamps just as he reached the mech, and his boots snapped into place on the beast's metal shoulders. The cultist slammed his salvage tool into the seam where the cockpit met with armor, his momentum helping wedge the thin tip of the tool into place. He hit the spreader and the power tool whined with effort as it pried open the seam a mere centimeter. With speed born from a lifetime of active worship, the cultist slid a small caliber pistol from its holster and jammed it into the gap. Drago had always preferred the tiny calibers to the larger ones, and thought of them as little wasps that gave a high velocity sting.

The gap in the seam wasn't enough for the barrel, but it was wide enough for the bullets. Drago kept his hand steady despite the sudden thrashing of the mech warrior, and squeezed the trigger as he let out a steady breath.

The pistol held seven rounds, the first he'd ever been blessed to be the guardian of, and all of them were fired point blank into the cockpit. Drago didn't have a good angle on the pilot, but the rounds were so small they couldn't penetrate the reinforced plexiglass of the cockpit, instead, they ricocheted furiously inside the tight space until finally all seven of them were buried in the flesh of the pilot.

Rhett ignored the fighting below them, he knew that Andromeda could survive for a short time in hard vacuum, as did she, and the table girl had wisely avoided holding her breath when they hit void. Her breath crystallized against his faceplate as she let it out at a steady and measured pace to avoid causing further damage to herself.

There was a stinging sensation in his back suddenly. Rhett felt Andromeda's body shudder as if from an impact, not so much the cold that began to grip her.

The mech warrior turned is spinning auto-cannon away from the scrapper and the table girl as they tumbled into space and focused it on the conflict below.

Drago saw the mech descending and leapt back and down behind the dead mech he'd mounted. The cultist's movements caused the dead mech to spin to face the oncoming war machine, and that maneuver saved the cultist from a salvo of mag rounds from the beast.

The explosive projectiles chewed into the ruined mech, and drove

both machine and man downwards towards the base of the main deck. The hostile mech continued to pound the metal carcass with fire as it lashed out with its autocannon, catching Dante in the arm.

The cultist's left arm went spinning as the autocannon's round bit through armor, flesh, and bone. Dante reacted quickly, aiming his pistol at the beast's back and firing as he rushed for the cover of a slagged airlock. No sooner had he reached cover then the cultist blacked out from the shock of his wound, the only thing keeping him from floating away being his mag-clamps.

The war machine ignored the hits to its back as it turned both of its mounted weapons on the dead mech and the man who killed it. The hurricane of rounds caused the cultist and the dead mech to spin over and over, each of them suffering from the devastating firepower. The full fury of the Coyote class mech rained down on Drago and the shattered corpse of the beast, and the pair smashed into the floor plating at the bottom of the main deck. The hostile mech landed near the wreckage, its weapons cycling on empty. The hostile mech stood over the remnants of the dead mech and the splattered remains of the cultist, its clawed hands making fists.

A signal flared inside the mech's cockpit, and the war machine pushed off the floor, using its onboard thrusters to carry it up through the hole in the hull and out into the void to rendezvous with its master.

Rhett's vision swam and he blinked his eyes, realizing that the station was behind Andromeda now instead of him, and then it changed again rapidly, making him realize that he and the table girl were tumbling away from the station into space. He looked down and watched with horror as the void seals on his armor knitted together to cover a massive exit wound in his midsection. The table girl had no such armor, and he could see where a sizeable projectile had passed through his body and punched gruesomely through her fragile form. As they spun through the void he could see the glittering fields of red ice spiraling behind them, sparkling against the darkness as they reflected and refracted light from the dying station.

Her eyes were open when he looked back at Andromeda, her face oddly serene in death. He could feel her body stiffen as the liquids inside her rapidly froze.

She stared at him, unblinking.

Rhett felt his own consciousness fading. His eyes locked on Andromeda's, his arms tight about her body, and he let the darkness swallow them both.

13. STOLEN BREATH

Sokol ate in silence. The modest tray of bland protein cubes and rehydrated vegetables comprising what he assumed would be the last meal of his life.

He sat alone in the community's mess hall, since every hand of Fiat Lux was set to one task or another in preparation for the fight that was coming. He found himself thinking of the fire roasted squash he often ate as a child, the fresh crunch of it a nearly forgotten sensation. The way fat would bubble and run from the meat of rabbits or quail that he and his father sometimes shot with low velocity game loads when they walked the fields. They were good memories, even if much of the pleasantness of them was the ignorance young Sokol had of the perfect cage he'd grown up in.

Endless fields of golden crops and seemingly limitless fresh water that came down from the mountain streams just beyond the valley he'd called home. He was keenly aware of the stale recycled air he was breathing, and it held little in comparison to the fresh breezes that used to sweep across the valley as winter changed to spring. Out here, in the black it was always winter in its own way. The freezing grasp of the void always clutching at whatever bits of light and warmth humanity dared bring with them.

He felt no guilt for his deeds on Andromeda Station, and he paused in the eating of his meal to take a deep breath. The life support system had been installed only a day before, and none too soon, as the commune was less than twenty-four standard hours away from a gasping death.

One dies so that the other can live, thought Sokol as he breathed out and took a bite from his tray, the chewy and tasteless vegetables seeming to him a fine metaphor. They might not have the vibrant flavor of what he remembered from his days as a Helion citizen, but they were his by right of arms. No bureaucrat had approved his ration, no funds changed hands, only that the ravagers had seized an agri-hauler years ago, and since used the seeds to grow their own produce. Nothing grew hearty and strong in space, but the commune did what it could, and he'd rather take his own meager yield in freedom than a feast that came with a slave collar.

The cost of such freedom was blood, and any who said that was not so, knew little of life out here on the ragged edge.

Sokol thought of Morgan and Gregory, along with a surprising number of stormers, who had paid that price on Andromeda. The station had put up much more of a fight than Kochi or the rest of the ravagers had anticipated. Gage reported that while the stormers

managed to push back cor-sec and the civilian defenders at every choke point, it had been a grind.

A mounted ship's gun in the hangar deck had obliterated Gregory and his loader just after he'd stowed the last section of the life support components. Despite being disabled by torpedoes from *Fatalis*, there was someone inside left alive and in possession of enough skill to re-route power to the gun for a parting shot.

Sokol himself, had witnessed Morgan's death at the hands of some bounty scrapper, as several of them had impossibly given the two mechs quite a bit of trouble on the main deck. He'd seen the Vulture jam a pistol into Night Witch and empty the magazine into Morgan. The sight of it had filled Sokol with something, a feeling of emptiness perhaps, a void that needed filling and the only thing that would do was to obliterate both mech and man. Regardless of how he felt about Morgan, even if those feelings themselves were a tangled mess, he could not leave Night Witch for enemy salvage. It was one of the few Helion philosophies he had held onto.

Fiat Lux would live another day thanks to the actions of *Fatalis* and its crew. Sadly, it might be just the one day, thought Sokol as he dabbed his mouth with a thin paper napkin before pushing away from the table, our lives are about to be measured in hours, if not minutes. The commune was buzzing with activity everywhere but the mess hall, and Sokol finally felt ready to begin his own preparations.

The pilot walked through the corridors of the commune, standing aside for others as they rushed this way and that, maintaining a calm that only those comfortable with violence could achieve.

Fiat Lux had never needed to go to full battle stations before, being ravagers, they knew that attack was a possibility so there were monthly drills. Yellow warning lights filled the chambers and corridors, and they would remain lit until either the commune fended off the attack or died in the attempt.

Not only were they a Red List community with none of the basic human rights to life and liberty enjoyed by corporate citizens, they were also bloody handed raiders. Every man, woman, and child was on deck for the defense of the community. They all knew everyone would be treated with equal brutality by whatever enemy sought to take a piece of them. Most of the people on Fiat Lux would be carrying small arms and preparing to repel boarders, while the seasoned warriors of the community would be crewing the weaponized debris field or launching counter attacks from the *Fatalis*.

Sokol entered the prime hangar bay and swept his gaze across it, taking in the sight of several ships in dry dock in addition to Swift Hammer and Ogre One. With Gregory dead and gone there was no pilot available who could take Swift Hammer into combat.

While Sokol was certainly capable of operating the mech warrior, its armaments and size made it less effective for the mission Sokol had been given. He and Ogre One were to remain on Fiat Lux and defend it against boarding parties. The Coyote class mech was well suited for conflict in the tight confines of the commune, at least in most of the areas, and what he couldn't reach while in the mech was the purview of the other defenders. Swift Hammer would have to sit this one out.

The ships docked in the bay were mostly chop jobs in one stage of being dismantled or another, as their vital systems were cannibalized for use in the commune or to help keep *Fatalis* flying. What couldn't be used by *Fatalis* or the commune itself went into the debris field. That field was the commune's primary defense, and no doubt the enemy would be making contact soon.

Sokol walked past the slave ship and something about it made him shiver for a moment. He recognized it right away as a Tasca cartel cutter, as had Kochi, which is why the captain insisted on seizing it and hauling the ship back to Fiat Lux. While most corporate citizens throughout the universe were relatively ignorant about slavery and the massive criminal empire that controlled it, the desperate folk whose names were on the Red List knew ships like this all too well. Red List slaves were low grade and so were not often hunted intentionally by cartel operatives, though most lister ships and communities were such easy targets that slavers didn't pass up the opportunity to take them. The cutters tended to prowl the same lonely places that listers did, and so these chance encounters were not uncommon.

The Tasca ship was a great prize, and Kochi had insisted that it be refurbished and brought back to life. The ship was well suited to small unit raiding, or could be outfitted to be a security frigate just outside the debris field, and such a valuable ship could not be left next to the corpse of Andromeda. Perhaps the enemy had used some tracker on board the ship to lead them to Fiat Lux, though nothing of the sort had been found aboard. Sokol did not know how he knew, but he had a sense of certainty that this ship had been involved with something much worse than slavery. He'd have slagged it at the station.

The pilot shrugged off his sense of dread about the ship and climbed into Ogre One, allowing the cold metal embrace of his mech to drive away all thoughts but those of war. The mech's grindcore spun up and as information flooded Sokol's awareness he both shuddered from the pain of the joining and exulted in the pleasure of becoming more than a man. Regardless of how the next few hours unfolded, Sokol Targe and Ogre One would conduct themselves in a manner befitting the war machine that they became together.

Instantly, Sokol's vision swam with information as data from

Thunder Walks and *Fatalis* poured into his systems. On the heads up display he could see a cascading stream of details about the battle that was unfolding on the edge of the debris field. As planned, Thunder Walks had been positioned on the exterior of the asteroid in which Fiat Lux had been built, as it was far too large to defend it from within. Angron's job was to eliminate as many troop transports, assault pods, gun drones, or whatever else the enemy might hurl at the commune. His weapons were not powerful enough to be of consequence in a ship-to-ship conflict, though they would be plenty devastating against smaller incoming targets.

The warship *Fatalis* prowled just outside the debris field, and Kochi the Deathless had defended that perimeter as long as he could. From what Sokol saw in his data feed, the battle had already been titanic, and soon the violence would reach the commune as enemy ships plowed into the debris field.

"They are coming, Sokol. Good hunting," boomed the voice of Angron, suddenly, in Sokol's headset as the pilot activated Ogre One's communications array. "I am the Storm that shatters the Walls!"

"I am the Beast that stalks the fields," responded Sokol as he used his claws to climb up the sheer wall of the hangar bay towards his chosen vantage point.

14. DEATHLESS

Kochi drew in a labored breath, wincing at the searing pain in his weary lungs as the precious mixture of compressed atmosphere fed his brain with oxygen. Like his time ravaged body, the warship *Fatalis* was living out its final moments. The discomforts of his physical form were mirrored by the wounded vessel.

The captain glanced at his launch bay monitors and watched as elite warriors from the Merchants Militant walked over the bodies of Lelani Ursa and her deck crew. He was unsure what these mercs called themselves, but he had known with absolute certainty once the first of their assault pods tore into the ship's hull that the *Fatalis* was done.

Gage and the majority of his stormers were even now desperately defending the debris field, and had they been aboard it would have only delayed the inevitable. Time, that blessing and curse which he had endured for so long now, was short, and yet he found himself clinging to every second he could squeeze from his body and his ship. The *Fatalis* might be battered and bloody, but it was not beaten, Kochi was not beaten.

The captain commanded the remaining guns to track on the nearest cor-sec frigate in range, ignited the backup thrusters and pushed them to max throttle while setting a collision course with the Reaper tug.

No sooner had they arrived home with Andromeda's life support system in the hold and a valuable Tasca slave cutter in tow then he had noticed the drive signatures of several ships on an intercept course. The sensors aboard *Fatalis* were outdated by a century, and though Kochi's personal experience and skill made up for their age, an updated system would have picked up on the tailing enemy much sooner. Little good it would have done, thought Kochi as he divided his mind between the firefight with the cor-sec frigate and the mercenaries sweeping through the interior of his ship.

Fiat Lux had barely a day to prepare, and they had done what they could. The weaponized debris field had been brought up to full combat crew, and there was a gun in the hand of every person defending the commune itself, not to mention the mighty presence of Thunder Walks and Ogre One. The *Fatalis* was too large to maneuver inside the debris field once the minefields were in place, and so there had been nothing else for Kochi do to but attack the enemy.

He could have taken the ship and fled. Now that the enemy fleet was in range of the commune they would no doubt have chosen to kill Fiat Lux and allow the *Fatalis* to be prey for a later hunt. Though flight had never entered the mind of the captain, and if his crew had

thought it they kept such things to themselves and did their jobs to the best of their ability. Captain Kochi demanded no less from any of his crew, or himself, and so they had gone to meet the enemy.

Kochi's heart was racing, more so than it had in a hundred years, as he directed the last functioning guns aboard *Fatalis* like a conductor would manage a symphony.

The cor-sec frigate was not prepared for the daring close quarters attack, the ship's captain likely a student of newer schools of void war in which torpedoes were the mainstay of all conflict.

Not so for Kochi, who came from another era of ship to ship combat, and he was in possession of a Wageri warship. The *Fatalis* had certainly caused much havoc with its violent torpedo attacks as the fleet came in range, but those too, were relatively outdated ordinance. Had the *Fatalis* been a modern capitol ship, the sudden flanking maneuver and torpedo fusillade Kochi had accomplished would have destroyed several of the frigates and at least crippled the lumbering Reaper tug. As it was, the bold attack had only seen the death of one frigate, a low-grade security cutter with hardly a crew of forty and a quarter the size of *Fatalis*.

The other frigates had screened well, and knocked out most of the torpedoes in flight, and those that did impact did not damage the ships enough to matter against the greater context of the conflict.

The mighty Reaper tug was a stout ship indeed, built for hard salvage ops in necrospace. Even though several torpedoes struck it, there just weren't enough vital systems to stop the ship. It was too simple, too rugged a design for anything but catastrophic core failure to stop it.

Kochi soon realized that even if he torpedoed the tug full of holes, it would still carry on despite most of the crew being slain. The Grotto ship's deficiencies in sophistication were made up for in sheer resilience, such was the way of Grotto Corporation and its people.

Not so, the cor-sec frigate that had allowed the *Fatalis* to close with it. The warship was equipped with a dozen tyrant class mag-cannons, larger version of what Ogre One carried on its arm, and at Kochi's command the seven that still functioned punished the frigate mercilessly.

By the time the frigate's battery crews were able to adjust their firing solutions to compensate for the point- blank attack, the *Fatalis* had already punched innumerable holes in the hull. At that range the mag-cannons went through the frigate's armor as easily as a bullet cutting through cloth.

The *Fatalis* rushed past the dying cor-sec ship, leaving the frigate powerless and bleeding atmosphere as the ravager kicked its thrusters and screamed towards the Reaper tug.

Kochi became aware of his monitors again, and on a dozen screens he could see the mercenaries brushing aside the pitiful resistance put up by his surviving crew. He had not accounted for a boarding action, and as he'd been making his second torpedo run against the enemy fleet, the Merchant Militants had appeared from spinward and driven right into his hull. Clearly they had moved on the Fiat Lux coordinates separate from the bulk of the enemy fleet, and were lying in wait for Kochi to make the exact direct assault he had.

They were expert ship killers, whoever they were. Helplessly, he watched them seize deck after deck of his ship, as if they were some kind of hyper-virus that had infected his physical body.

The reprisal for Andromeda was disproportionate to the value of the station. Nothing that backwater orbital has would have warranted the sheer cost of mounting such a punitive mission.

Kochi assumed that there must have been some kind of tracking device on the Tasca ship that Lelani had not found, that was the only way he could imagine that they could have been hunted down so easily and so quickly. The fact that five security frigates, a Reaper tug, and a Merchants Militant faction had been dispatched to purge Fiat Lux implied that there was something of unknown and significant value about the Tasca slave cutter.

It was too late to consider such things however. Kochi heard the sound of gunfire just outside the hatch of his pilot's chamber.

Kochi saw on a monitor that several charges were being placed at the fore of his ship by some of the elites, who must have moved across the spinward side of the warship's hull while he'd been focused on his melee with the frigate.

Kochi was about to command one of the mag-cannons to blast them off of his hull when several tremendous explosions caused his senses to white out with pain and overload.

The entire engine section had been slagged, a quarter of the ship was sheered away from the main body by the traumatic blast and the ship was rapidly decompressing.

The mercs must have brought a tactical nuke with them. Kochi heard the lock on the hatch give and armored bodies force their way into his chamber with no intention of capturing the ship.

An armored hand grabbed his shoulder and he felt a painful pressure in his back. Six inches of bloody serrated blade now protruded from his chest.

His heart staggered painfully as he realized that the vital organ had been transfixed by the blade.

Then the planted charges detonated, sending the *Fatalis* tumbling.

Spinning uncontrollably through the frozen void, Kochi, the

Deathless and the warship *Fatalis* died.

15. FANGS OUT

Rhett Calibos flexed his right hand for the seventh time since sliding his fingers into the tight mesh interior of the armored glove. He had worn such a glove on countless occasions, nearly every day since he had graduated from the Rubicon cor-sec academy, and that was years ago. It was as if he could not quite get comfortable with it, and no matter how many times he clenched and unclenched his fist the armor just didn't feel right. He could sense the eyes of Captain Estrada and John Kratos upon him, and Rhett forced himself to stop flexing.

"Keeps me lucid, Captain," said Rhett, displeased with how thick his tongue felt in his mouth, the painkillers and endorphin meds he'd been abusing for the last several days made it hard to keep his mind sharp or his speech from occasionally slurring. "I'm good. Let's just get this done."

The captain nodded and turned his chair to look back to the viewport and what lay ahead of them. The Fiat Lux ravager commune was obscured behind a thick layer of orbital debris. From their vantage point just above and behind the Reaper tug, the men strapped into seats on the pilot deck could see that it was going to be a bloody grind to reach the target.

Vitrian was holding course, though it was a challenge for even the brilliant pilot to avoid the obstacles in their path. The Reaper tug was about to impact against the main perimeter, and once it did, the only safe place would be just on the edge of the ship, between the prow as it smashed into the debris and the swirling wake that the ship would leave behind.

"I know the Reapers talked about it during the brief, but are they really just going to ram into that debris field?" Vitrian wondered aloud to the chamber. "That whole area must be mined and crawling with who knows what kinds of bootleg gun batteries. Even the cor-sec frigates have all pulled back."

"That's the Baen 6 Reaper tug," responded John from his seat opposite Rhett. "Grotto builds all the tugs to be as tough as they can, but this one in particular saw duty in the Ellisian trade war. They've reinforced the hull for just this sort of thing, same goes for the scrap wagons."

"Just keep your eyes open, Vitrian, and stay light on the stick," counseled Captain Estrada, his expression grim as he fired up the plasma lance. "Let the soldiers and warships do the real fighting, we only have the one job."

"If we die I'm going to blame you, Bella Mons," snorted Vitrian

with something approaching camaraderie. “Genius extrapolation of data spores and approach vectors might get us bounties, but I think this one could be a little bit more hard duty than we bargained for.”

“Not my fault that Aegis put a hold on our payment until recovery,” snapped Bella, her voice hard but her face betraying the slightest of smiles. “Personally, I think they should pay us twice, the yard lost it, not us.”

Rhett swallowed hard at the memory of the last few days of his troubled life. He’d woken up on the table in the modest medical bay of the *Vulture Six*, with Bella Mons hand inside the gaping wound in his midsection and Doak helping to hold him steady.

Apparently, Captain Estrada had suffered from a radical change of heart and ordered the *Six* back into the fray. By the time they arrived, the *Fatalis* was gone, taking with it the Tasca prize they’d left tethered to the yard ring. Whatever force in the universe that refused to allow Rhett Calibos to finally die had placed the scrapper’s unconscious form within scanner range of the *Six* as it returned to what was left of Andromeda.

Captain Estrada messaged the fleet that the ship had been seized, but that his tech officer had a bead on it. The *Six* was immediately ordered to pursue the ravagers with all haste. Bella had run the hull, engine, and armament specifics she’d recorded of the warship’s attack and had been able to pull up schematics of the *Fatalis*, or at least records other observers had made of Wageri ships, as little was officially known about them. She established a safe distance for the *Six* to maintain and Estrada ordered them to burn.

There was no functional med bay left on Andromeda, and though cor-sec and relief vessels were en route to do what they could to rescue the station, the *Six* could not stay behind and help. While in transit, they were informed that Dante had been found and was in recovery, though he was the lucky one, being on board the *Six*, heading deeper into necrospace was, effectively, a death sentence for Rhett. His wound was grievous, and without proper medical facilities, the only thing keeping him standing was the massive amount of drugs Bella had supplied him with.

When they had been joined in their pursuit by the Grotto Reaper tug and a clutch of freelance cor-sec frigates, everyone aboard the *Six* knew they were involved in something much more complex than a simple bounty salvage.

“They killed Andromeda,” said Rhett, thickly to himself, remembering what he’d said when Bella and Estrada both insisted he take the skiff out to dock with the Reaper tug and get proper medical attention. He could not fathom missing out on this fight, and refused to recuse himself from the mission.

The Reaper tug slammed into the outer perimeter of the debris field, shuddering from the detonation of a multitude of anti-ship mines and collisions with debris. Scraps of ships and orbitals hung in a tight cluster around the asteroid commune that was Fiat Lux, a grisly testament to how long and aggressively the ravagers had been terrorizing the sector.

As Rhett watched, several gun batteries opened up on the tug, and though the lumbering ship had a few batteries of its own which fired back, the ship did not pause in its forward progress.

Several larger debris pieces revealed themselves in proximity to be functional or at least semi-functional ships, shuttles, and self-contained weapons batteries, all of which concentrated their fire on the massive tug.

The Grotto ship's response was to launch scrap wagons, the up-armored assault transports of which John had spoken earlier. Rhett could see one of the wagons bash through several pieces of smaller debris and shrug off anti-air fire before slamming into the side of what appeared to be a converted cargo hauler. From what John had told them, there would be a full platoon of salvage marines disembarking the wagons and fighting a boarding action. Sure enough, the ship's weapons went silent as whatever crew within worked to fight off the Grotto invaders.

"You two had better get down to the dropship and strap in," said Vitrian as he narrowly avoided a tumbling piece of debris. "The ride only gets worse from here. Once we scope a solid landing zone, we'll get you and those marines out of the storm."

Rhett shared a nod with Captain Estrada before the bounty scrapper and former marine rose from their seats and engaged their mag-clamps. It was a short, turbulent, journey to the launch bay where the dropship awaited.

Rhett and John both were already in their full kit, though Rhett had to forego his abdominal armor plate so that the auto-doc device strapped to his midsection would fit. The machine monitored his vitals, working continuously to manage his dosage of antiseptics, painkillers, anti-inflammatories, and nutrient solutions, as his ability to eat was hampered by his damaged organs until he could undergo proper surgery.

Rhett knew it was a reckless decision he'd made, maybe even suicidal, but he could not bear to stand aside. The bounty scrapper had already adjusted his compulsory accounts with Captain Estrada, and the fact that the captain was willing to allow Rhett's desired adjustments was a testament to the fact that Estrada understood, in his own way, why Rhett had to be there.

Rhett wondered if losing Vader, Drago, and Andromeda Station in

such a short time span had softened the captain's usual staunch pragmatism as he ducked down to enter the dropship's cramped interior.

Inside were the familiar faces of Doak, Quinn, and Sparks, who thankfully had remembered her pistol. It was unfortunate that the engineer and the cutters, including John, had to be on this run, but without them there was no guaranteed way to secure the ship or, more importantly, the nav-computer.

There was no telling what the ravagers had done to the ship, and they would need skilled scrappers to make good on recovery. Not that the dropship wasn't full of skilled salvage professionals, Rhett reminded himself, as he looked at the four Reapers who had been temporarily assigned to the *Six*. They had kept to themselves, camping in the hangar bay during the eight hours between them being added to the crew and the final approach on Fiat Lux.

"Rhett Calibos, I am Boss York," announced one of the salvage marines as Rhett gently lowered himself onto the grav-couch nearest the hatch, "Command has instructed your captain to cede your leadership duties to myself. I hope that will not be a problem for you."

"It's your show, Boss, I just work here," responded the bounty scrapper through gritted teeth as a surge of injections from the auto-doc hit his system before pointing at his comrades. "Take care of my people and they'll get that ship secured."

"You don't look so good there, bounty scrapper," observed one of the Reapers, a stocky man who cradled a heavy machine gun and whose helmet's visor was, Rhett noticed, actually a metal face with a breathing apparatus built into it, "Sure you won't stand aside? There's enough heat coming down on these guys that I don't think us having one less rifle is going to matter much. No offense."

"Takeda, leave him be," said Boss York firmly, "A man doesn't armor up with a wound like that without a good reason. Best to leave him to it."

"Takeda? As in Ben Takeda? Of Tango Platoon?" said John after a few moments of staring openly at the Reaper's grim mask.

"We don't talk about Tango Platoon," snapped Boss York as all eyes in the compartment went to John, and he looked like he was about to say more on the subject when the warning lights began to flash and the launch sequence began its brief countdown.

"Twenty seconds!" came Estrada's voice over everyone's comm-beads.

"Reapers ready!" responded Boss York as everyone prepared for the gut churning launch of the dropship.

"Vultures ready!" growled Rhett through the pain after making eye contact with each of his comrades.

“Good hunting,” said Estrada. Vitrian released the hatch to rocket the dropship into the void.

Everyone was shaking in their grav-couches as the dropship screamed through the void towards whatever landing zone Vitrian had scoped on the surface. No sooner had they hit space than the dropship began executing maneuvers physically impossible in atmosphere, and still somewhat difficult in three-hundred-sixty-degree void.

Rhett wasn’t sure if Vitrian was piloting the dropship or if they had Bella on the stick since the *Six* was still in the thick of the storm. Regardless, Rhett knew by the jinks and jolts that it was some expert flying.

“Something just scratched one of the marine transports!” screeched Bella, confirming Rhett’s theory as the dropship banked hard. “There’s a frakking mech warrior on the asteroid!”

A salvo of shots, presumably from the mech warrior, tore through the dropship. There was precious little atmosphere in the troop cabin and what little there was bled out through the multitude of holes.

As Vitrian and Bella shouted at each other over the team channel about the pilot attempting to engage the mech with the *Vulture Six*’s plasma lance, Rhett noticed Sparks. She sat quietly, her body slack despite the turbulence of the wild ride to the landing zone. It took a moment for him to realize that much of her chest cavity was gone, along with the strap keeping her bound to the grav-couch. The only thing keeping her body from floating around the cabin every time Bella changed course was the fact that her body was plugging the hole in the hull. Rhett looked away, no time for grief, only action.

The Reaper with the face mask looked at John and spoke.

“You see action like this before you retired?” asked the man called Ben Takeda.

“Ellisian trade war,” nodded John as the ship jostled more and righted its course as cheers went up from Vitrian celebrating having burned out the mech warrior’s cockpit with a precise hit from the plasma lance. “Never retired though. Laid down my rifle and went AWOL not long before the Reaper strike. Bond enforcers sold me to *Vulture Six* instead of dragging me back to Kratos 12.”

“Hard universe,” said one of the other Reapers, prompting nods and grunts of agreement from the rest of the people in the dropship.

The warning lights changed and the initial seals broke on the dropship’s ejection hatch, prompting everyone to brace for impact. Once they hit, the hatch would blow and the grav-couches would eject them in the usual cascading fashion.

Rhett clenched his fist and then gripped his compact rifle, ready to balance accounts.

16. LAST LIGHT

Sokol had been monitoring the battle as best he could, though once the *Fatalis* went dark there was little to hear but what Angron could see from within Thunder Walks.

The Reaper tug had barreled into the debris field like a stampeding stud bull, shrugging off just about everything the ravager defenders could throw at it. The security frigates made a few attempts to follow, but were soon driven away with fresh wounds to lick by the mines and defensive batteries. The tug launched wave after wave of troop bearing assault craft as it drove hard for the Fiat Lux asteroid.

Thunder Walks accounted for himself well, and smoked two assault craft before being blindsided by a bounty scrapper ship equipped with a daring pilot and a precise plasma lancer. That made it the second mech warrior to fall against these glorified scavengers. Sokol hoped they attempted to re-take the Tasca ship. There was no other reason for such a strong force to risk attacking the Fiat Lux, especially since there was so little financial incentive in hard goods or raw materials.

It had to be the slave cutter.

Sokol fired once more with his auto-cannon, splattering a salvage marine across the corridor as the mech warrior lashed out with the mag-cannon to knock another marine off his feet in the chamber Sokol had just emerged from. The mech pilot had decided to climb down and patrol instead of waiting in the hangar bay, his impatience to get his piece of meat for the tribe overpowering his tactical certainty that the slave ship was the point of this attack, not revenge for the Andromeda.

Ogre One's headset pinged on requests for reinforcements as another platoon of Reapers pushed past the defenders and assaulted the greenhouses.

Sokol sprinted down the tight corridors and then across a wide cargo catwalk that gave him access to one of the skiff tunnels in the network that crisscrossed the commune. The tunnels had been allowing him to strike and fade with devastating effect, considering that the marines were only just now learning that the tunnels connected everything.

Sokol emerged from the tunnel several minutes later and smashed through the flimsy hatch that connected the tunnel access and the first of three greenhouse grow chambers.

There were bodies everywhere, nearly all of them ravagers, and Sokol could see from the tiny corpses that were among the dead that the Reapers were not discriminating between combatants and non-

combatants. He stepped over the bodies and the trashed grow chamber, following the sounds of fighting.

Ogre One entered the second chamber and immediately the targeting systems chimed with opportunities. Sokol unleashed his auto-cannon, betting on the small arms fire to get the attention of the marines, perhaps kill a few, and most certainly distract them from the defenders they'd been engaging moments before. Two marines collapsed in bloody heaps as the rest spread out and bracketed him with return fire in a disciplined manner that only soldiers could execute. Sokol pushed Ogre One through the chamber, smashing his way across the grow room, crushing the delicate crops beneath his metal feet as he exchanged withering fire with the marines.

Suddenly his mech shook from the force of sustained impacts and he hurled himself through another series of growing beds to escape. His mech's vital systems were screaming at him, and Sokol noticed that one of the Reapers was using a heavy machine gun. Sokol overrode the warning chimes and let loose with his mag-cannon.

The high velocity rounds punched through the walls of the greenhouse chamber in addition to shattering the armored body of the heavy machine gunner. Without releasing the trigger of the mag-cannon, Sokol brought up his auto-cannon and poured on the full fury of the mech's armaments. The remaining marines had spread out and managed to flank him, the mech's targeting systems were struggling to keep up, yet Sokol let his instincts guide him, letting his breath sync up in time with the pulse of the grindcore.

He wasn't sure at what point he stopped firing and resorted to his claws.

Sokol blinked to clear his vision and then realized that it was not his eyes, but the cockpit that was smeared in gore. He engaged the wipers and they revealed a greenhouse complex piled with broken bodies of ravagers and marines. He stood alone, Ogre One the only survivor of the grisly encounter. His ammo drums for both weapons were exhausted, and the re-loaders were mounted on the wall in the hangar bay. Sokol growled and began running back towards the tunnel network, determined to get re-armed before the next platoon found him with naught but claws.

The defense channel had become a cacophony of Fiat Lux fighters calling out tactical maneuvers, or calling for help, as the Grotto soldiers began to make landfall and penetrate the commune. It was clear in an instant that there would be no quarter given, as the marines appeared to be killing anyone they encountered, regardless of whether they fought back or surrendered. They were Red List after all, though Sokol, what more could they expect?

In disgust, he shut off his communications link just as he reached

the hangar bay, not wishing to hear the last words of so many ravagers who at the very end of it all revealed themselves to be as weak as any other scavenger or capitalist slave.

Now it was just he and Ogre One, man and mech communing to become a Coyote class war machine.

So much for death to the false idols of currency, scoffed Sokol as he ejected his spent ammo drums and backed up to the small reloaded rack they'd installed in the hangar bay. It only took a few seconds to slot more ammunition into his weapons, but he had to power down while he did so, exposing him for a few critical moments.

As he waited, the outer hatch of the hangar bay slid open and the bay began to rapidly decompress. Most of the rest of the commune had been emptied of atmosphere, either by marines intentionally punching holes in key airlocks or just the messy result of such brutal close quarters combat.

Even though only a third of his load-out was completed, Sokol disengaged and slowly sped up his grindcore to full power, having kept it at a low growl to preserve the mech's energy reserves.

Four marines rushed into the bay, their mag-clamps engaged, and immediately began to fire on Ogre One. Sokol cursed his luck and turned his cockpit away from their assault as he pushed the machine as hard as he could to flee for cover as it continued to struggle to reach full power.

Another marine with a heavy machine gun, this one sporting a wicked face mask, seemed to have some experience fighting mechs, and pinpointed his shots against Sokol's mag-cannon.

Sokol disappeared behind one of the half-chopped ships just as Ogre One hit full power. He leapt from the ground and sailed through the near zero gravity to dig his claws into the gangplanks above. Had he simply remained in his perch from before, Sokol knew he could have wiped out the entire boarding party, yet he had let his bloodlust drive him into fighting elsewhere.

What did it matter though? Fiat Lux was gone either way. All that remained was taking as many of these capitalists with him when he died. He had a good start already, though without his mag-cannon the mech was at a disadvantage. These Reapers knew their work, and as the heavy machine gunner continued to punish Ogre One with fire the others set about flanking him from below.

Sokol scampered across the ceiling of the bay to avoid the machine gunner. Ogre One's right leg suddenly wasn't working quite properly and now that he was paying attention it looked like his breathing apparatus was damaged too, the incorrect mixture of chemicals giving him a euphoric sensation that he knew would increase over time until he asphyxiated. Determined not to die

gasping, the pilot reversed his body position and pushed himself off the ceiling with his arms.

As he descended Sokol activated his auto-cannon so that he could strafe the enemy position. His ammunition was low, and it was a wide arc of fire and thus far less accurate, though he was rewarded by two of the marines going down. One of them he was sure had died from the way the marine's helmet exploded from the impact. The rest of the marines and bounty scrappers had leapt for cover, and three of the scrappers had rushed up the open ramp and into the belly of the Tasca ship.

Sokol kept firing with his auto-cannon as he rushed for the tunnel access point, positive that if his ammunition held out until he reached it that he could still make a few more good kills before meeting his end. Without ammunition and Ogre One already damaged he would be foolish to attempt to continue to engage an experienced and aggressive group of enemies. Sokol figured that if he could reach the tunnels, perhaps he could ambush a few more marines and tear them apart with his claws before the damaged breathing apparatus finished him off or someone got in a lucky shot.

Ogre One's grindcore roared with effort as it worked against its damaged gears, but it got its pilot to the tunnels before the auto-cannon went dry.

The tunnel was in low light mode, the main power having been shut down at some point, likely from marines seizing systems control.

The war machine stalked into the darkness in search of prey.

17. PAID IN FULL

Rhett sprinted into the darkness after the mech warrior, ignoring the shouts from his comrades, certain this was the bastard that had killed Andromeda. The bounty scrapper coughed and spat up blood into the bottom of his helmet, knowing that all of the physical exertion had torn open the poorly mended wound in his midsection. The auto-doc wasn't even giving off warning chimes any longer, he'd shut those off, it still struggled to keep him going, but he had grown tired of its insistent wail for him to stop. It didn't help that he'd taken a round in the left shoulder from the beast's auto-cannon when it shot its way out of the hangar bay.

Thankfully, they'd interrupted it during a powered down reload, had the thing been fully operational and at max ammo it could have cut them all down. As it was the marine named Takeda had ripped into it with heavy machine gun fire, and it was leaking both blood from the pilot and hydraulics from the machine. Rhett ignited his body lights and gun lamp, making the trail of glittering liquid easier to follow.

Eventually, the trail led Rhett into a large transit hub, and what he saw there made him nearly drop his rifle.

At least a dozen bodies, men, women, and children lay in ragged heaps throughout the chamber. Bullet holes riddled the walls, and Rhett could make out the armored corpse of a salvage marine. The mech warrior stood near the far wall and was in the process of eviscerating another salvage marine, the beast's metal claws making short work of the Grotto man's armor.

Rhett snapped his rifle to his shoulder and strode towards the mech as he fired round after round at the war machine. He'd seen how both the twins and the Reapers had pinpointed their fire on the mech's vital systems and joints, so he did the same. It took every ounce of discipline Rhett had in him to avoid going full-auto, but images of Andromeda in his mind allowed him to focus. With every round he hurled against the mech warrior he thought of her, of the station, and soon of the Dunhills.

His rifle clicked empty and with the speed of a lifetime at war he swapped out the spent magazine for a fresh one and continued punishing the mech with rounds. The beast stumbled under the sustained fire, and as Rhett fired his last round the monstrosity collapsed against the wall and sank to the floor plating.

Rhett fell to the floor himself, dropping his rifle as he struggled to stay upright. The bounty scrapper spits up more blood as he slid his pistol from its holster and pushed himself to his feet. He staggered

forward until he reached the fallen mech warrior.

The cockpit was already cracked from so many impacts, from rifles, pistols, and heavy machine gun rounds. Rhett raised his pistol and fired once, causing the cracks to spider, then a second time, and a third. It was the fourth shot that shattered the cockpit, though Rhett did not stop shooting until his magazine was empty, ten rounds later.

He turned and began to walk back, stopping at the center of the hub. Rhett looked around him, taking in the details of the bodies of the red listers that surrounded him. They weren't the Dunhills and he wasn't cor-sec, but the difference seemed to him, one of semantics.

This was as good a place as any, Rhett thought, it was just right, in fact.

The bounty scrapper removed the auto-doc and let it fall to the floor before he collapsed to his knees.

The convict released his grip on the pistol, and it too clattered across the ground plating.

The cor-sec trooper pulled off the gloves that had never quite seemed to fit and discarded them.

Then the man lay on his back amongst the dead as he succumbed to the pain and blood loss from his own wounds.

All debts were paid.

18. LIFE AFTER DUTY

Rhett's arrangement had taken everyone by surprise, none more so than John Kratos himself. Rhett Calibos had no family outside his fellow Vultures, but Captain Estrada dutifully honored the fallen scrapper's wishes.

Rhett's final message for John had been a simple one, that John was trying to leave war behind, and that he shouldn't be punished for making the brave choice.

The former salvage marine was a man of Grotto, and reacted coolly to the news of Rhett's post-mortem generosity. He had quietly packed his few belongings during the voyage back to Andromeda Station, and it appeared to his comrades that he was as accepting of his newfound freedom as he had been of his indentured bondage to the *Six*.

No sooner had they towed the slave ship back to the yard than a ship with Augur Corporation ident codes took possession and paid the bounty. Within an hour of reaching the station the cursed ship was towed off into the darkness. There was much in the way of traffic about the station as multitudes of companies and individuals sought to rebuild and re-settle the orbital community.

The *Vulture Six* docked in the temporary hangar bay to take on fresh supplies and drop John off before they ventured back out for the next bounty.

Captain Estrada had Bella Mons working overtime on finding the next score and he had several leads promising enough to warrant the swift turnaround. There was no rest for the bounty scrapper crew of the *Six* and after what they'd endured over the last several weeks they were all eager to return to work. The reward for the slave ship had filled everyone's accounts, and there was nothing like success to fuel one's thirst for more.

"Your crew doesn't even want to leave the ship for supplies, paying extra for it all to be delivered," said John to Captain Estrada as the hatch lowered and the cargo plank extended to allow both men to exit the ship and enter the hangar bay.

"People loved this station, it wasn't just Calibos," said the captain, his voice heavy. "I think they would rather not see it for a while. Give Andromeda some time to heal, maybe give themselves a little more time too. We'll rendezvous with a headhunter barge in a few days anyway, lots of empty seats to fill."

"*Six* has had a rough time of it, sir," said John. "We call it early retirement in Grotto and we don't drink to the dead, but I'll find some mescal for Calibos. I promise."

“It occurs to me that lives take on a sort of momentum, and the longer one holds the same course, that force becomes more difficult to change,” observed Estrada as he tapped the signature authorization on his tablet and transmitted John’s indentured term fulfillment notice along with the full amount from Rhett’s compulsory savings account. “I don’t think Calibos would have known how to switch off, probably would have just viced himself into oblivion.”

“He struck me as a man who knew himself, even the ugly parts,” nodded John as he walked down the cargo plank onto the floor plating of the hangar deck. “Maybe it’s better this way.”

“Well, he gave you a gift, John Kratos,” said Captain Estrada as he extended a hand to the former marine, who shook it. “Shortest Vulture tour I’ve ever heard of, hope you make the most of it. This place will be needing repair staff for months, and plenty of cor-sec positions open, too.”

“When I was a marine I always preferred the torch to the gun,” observed John as he looked out over the hangar deck, taking in the sight of all the repairs still underway aboard the beleaguered station. “The universe could do with one less trigger man.”

Captain Estrada smiled and said nothing, then after a moment he turned and walked back up the cargo plank, the hatch closing after him.

John Kratos looked once more at the hangar deck as work crews busily continued to mend the station.

“This is the job,” John said out loud to nobody in particular, and entered his name and salvage credentials into the first labor terminal he saw on his way to Tae Mae’s for the promised mescal.

19. THE ANOINTED

The Anointed Actuary breathed deeply and savored the musky scent of the aromatics that gently simmered in the shallow infuser. He walked quietly across the lacquered wooden floor and then sat cross-legged upon a small cushion near the far end of the modest chamber. On a low table in front of him rested a pair of data-gloves, which paired with three projectors that were embedded in the table itself. He took another measured breath, held it for a moment, and then let it out slowly as he reached out to pick up the gloves.

The Actuary flexed his fingers as dozens of micro-dermals slid into his skin, connecting his mind and body to the system. Several hundred meters below the modest building of wood and stone that surrounded the room was a reinforced titanium chamber which housed the system's prime server. Through this miracle in computing, the Actuary was able to examine every scrap of data collected on his target.

He initiated his session, and his body shuddered as his mind and senses were flooded with information. It took him the space of several breaths to bring the data stream under control as he compartmentalized his mind in order to cope with the sheer volume of sensory input. The tempest of three-dimensional images being displayed by the projectors began to sort into a series of six clusters. Gently the Actuary raised his gloved hands to pull one cluster closer to him.

He was about to begin his quarterly cogitation of Kratos 12, which was no small undertaking. For a single mind to hold in its grasp the totality of a planet's socio-economy took a prodigious amount of energy and discipline. Once he began the process the Actuary would not eat or sleep for several days as he willfully slowed his metabolism to cope with the demands of the project.

Kratos 12 was a thriving industrial metropolis in the Kratos system, and responsible for seventy-two percent of the system's gross domestic productivity. This was in no small part due to the active life bonds imposed upon the many billions of citizens. Despite the successful unionization of the Reaper Corps and an overall reduction in emphasis of the life bond as a central debt product of Grotto Corporation, those bonds still existed and represented a tremendous commercial interest. This was to say nothing of the manufacturing and shipping interests upon Kratos 12, in addition to the increased flow of spoils from the Ellisian trade war that had infused the Kratos system and much of Grotto Corporation at large.

His duties required him to cogitate those systems that existed

within his mandated fiefdom, though as he performed his obligations he bought up a seventh cluster.

He had personally encrypted that particular data stream, using a series of symbols that had relevance only to him, and considering how removed he was from society, only his most loyal attendants would have the slightest chance at cracking the code.

The system logged everything he did while communing with the interface, as much a digital check against any single Actuary going rogue as the assassination protocols followed by the bodyguards. By dividing his mind and engaging with both his clandestine endeavor and his required cogitation the Actuary could pursue his quest in secret. The mental and physical stress of such a thing may rob him of vitality and lifespan, but he calculated that these were acceptable costs to incur. The stability of corporate civilizations cost much in the way of sacrifice from those human beings which lived within them, and no one, even the Anointed himself, was exempt from its price.

The Bottom Line must be attended, he repeated to himself, the actuarial mantra helping him clear his mind for the task at hand.

There was an arrangement between House Indron and Augur Corporation that the Actuary had not only allowed, but overseen. Lord Soren Aiken was easily the most capable Grotto elite that the Actuary had encountered, having proven himself to be in possession of both a sound military mind and a keen understanding of the delicate socio-economic balance in the universe.

Grotto Corporation needed more elites like him, thought the Actuary, if they were to prosper in the coming decades.

The universe was changing, and had been doing so from the first moment humanity encountered the ancient machine race that had come to be known in common parlance as the Gedra. The Actuary was convinced by that first encounter that he was bearing witness to the event horizon of a quantum entanglement that would re-make civilization itself.

There was so much they had yet to understand about the enigmatic machines and whatever holocaust wiped out their creators. This arrangement between Augur and Grotto, clandestine and technically illegal as it might be, was the only way forward. It was a dangerous alliance to be sure, and had yet to bear significant fruit, but the Actuary was as patient a man as he was methodical.

As one part of his mind worked furiously at pouring over the data coming from Kratos 12, a portion of his energy and attention delved into the information in the seventh cluster. His hands worked with blinding speed, providing a physical component to the cogitation so that his brain would be able to maintain the connection and keep pace with the data as is moved through his awareness. In one breath, he

adjusted the core interest rate, giving it a minuscule increase that would go relatively unnoticed by individual citizens and yet provide a much-needed infusion of liquidity for the infrastructure ministry.

In another breath, the Actuary poured over an after-action report from a Reaper tug out of Baen 6, in which the Reapers purged a Red List community by the name of Fiat Lux.

The Actuary temporarily lifted a pollutant restriction in several industrial districts in the capital city of Kratos 12, and set the restriction to re-activate a week later. The brief reprieve from the restrictions would allow the refineries there to maximize their output for that time period, and that excess productivity would compensate for the degraded growth that would occur next month due to several difficulties in shipping on the far side of the sector. He estimated that there would be a ten percent increase in health complications amongst the population in the immediate area, in addition to those who worked in the refineries, though the human cost threshold was within acceptable limits relative to the Bottom Line.

As he proofread the restriction reprieve and authorized a slight cost increase of basic services in the affected districts, the Actuary continued to analyze the data from the Reaper tug.

There it was, after years lost in space the Tasca ship had been secured. The cargo appeared to have been jettisoned or otherwise removed from the ship, though the nav-computer had been recovered.

The Actuary carefully crafted a macro routine that compared life bond outputs of the present day with life bond outputs of pre-unionized Kratos 12 and let it run.

While that macro occupied the system, he diverted his entire attention to the next task. The contents of the nav-computer had been moved into a clean room and synced with the system so that the Actuary could interact with it. As he investigated, the Actuary saw that someone had attempted to scrub the nav-computer with a series of manual commands. Functionally, the computer had been blanked, though data could never actually be completely eliminated from the hardware, the trick was just accessing it.

Carefully, the Actuary reached out through the system and discovered the identity of the company that manufactured that model of nav-computer. Upon finding the company, Metis Ordo, the Actuary took note that Grotto Corporation was in possession of nearly thirty percent of the small company's stocks. He authorized a full purge of all interests held in the company, which happened in seconds, and then he waited.

Within five standard minutes the market had reacted, and other shareholders, fearing a catastrophic loss or incident within Ordo Metis, dumped their shares. No sooner did the shares hit the exchange

than the Actuary used his tremendous resources to purchase every available share. By the time he was finished, Grotto Corporation was in control of ninety percent of Metis Ordo.

As his macros continued to run the Actuary worked to cover his tracks. In the matter of a few minutes he had successfully engaged in a hostile takeover of Metis Ordo, and while that was perfectly legal, it had taken a titanic amount of resources to accomplish.

In order to mask his true purpose, the Actuary initiated contracts with the freshly seized company to outfit the entirety of Kratos 12's domestic fleet with the Metis nav-computer. Given that Grotto now owned the controlling interest in the company, the end costs of the retro-fit would be far less than if they had been purchased directly and most of the funds allocated would return to Grotto coffers anyway. It was a bold move, and he would likely be required to explain the minutiae of his logic during his next peer review, but that could wait.

A high-level request for universal access protocols went from the Actuary to the tech masters of Metis Ordo, and while he waited for their response the Actuary continued his official work with Kratos 12.

The Reaper tug out of Kratos 12 had seen hard duty in the Ellisian trade war, and as yet the command elements had not participated in any overt military actions since returning from the front. The Actuary drafted an anti-piracy mandate for the Kratos system and established a variable range of hazard bonuses, having compared the payouts to cost of engagements and determined that the loss of life and equipment would balance against the estimated salvage and human spoils.

By the time he was finished with that, he saw that Metis had dutifully responded with the access protocols. The Actuary set up another macro that compared the aptitude and performance ratings for pending student graduates with the labor needs of Kratos 12, and gently adjusted the scores of graduates who were borderline between one job assignment or the other. As his macro molded the lives of millions, the Actuary used his system to connect with the nav-computer.

Now that he had the universal access protocols he was able to interact with the data still on the hardware of the nav-computer. He pulled up the transit logs of the ship, and was reminded that he was looking into the records of a Tasca cartel slave ship. While Grotto Corporation sometimes did business with the cartel, it was all clandestine and wreathed in several layers of plausible deniability. He was aware that Lord Indron had authorized a joint mission to be conducted with a clutch of Tasca operatives and members of the Merchants Militant known as the Dire Swords.

The joint mission had resulted in the capture of a Gedra entity

unlike any other previously encountered. The surface of the planet in question had also been covered in a series of ring structures that were thought to be part of a mighty energy weapon.

The Dire Swords were re-assigned upon completion of the mission, leaving the Tasca ship to transport the entity to a remote Augur research station. The cartel ship was supposed to take a lengthy journey across the frontier instead of going directly to the station, in order to give the appearance of simply being a slave ship on the prowl. The ship had disappeared without any communication or hint of its last location.

The Actuary skipped through the logs to the last several weeks of the ship's data. He pulled the final course plotted and saw that the ship had been moving across the bleeding edge of the frontier, much further out than anticipated. They were heading towards Cardisk, the first civilized planet one would encounter if coming from the frontier back into corporate space. To anyone investigating transit logs it would have looked as if the Tasca ship docked in Cardisk to sell off its cargo, and then could enter corporate space with a multitude of potential destinations, getting lost in the crowd of the highly-trafficked region.

However, the ship never made it. Somewhere between its last contact on Urik Station and Cardisk something went wrong. The Actuary brought up charts of the region, and though they were incomplete, he had three hits on his search.

Two were lonely dark planets on far orbit around one of the solar bodies that were still in their infancy. Both had small compounds on the surface, though were little more than cheap rock breaker settlements, barely scraping together enough from their prospecting to pay the corporate fees. The other was Londstride, a registered co-op, up to date on their dues to the Currency Control Complex.

The Actuary pulled up population records and his breath caught in his throat as he saw a familiar name in the list. A former salvage marine from the Baen Reaper corps, the very marine force responsible for purging Fiat Lux only days ago.

The Anointed Actuary took a deep breath and let it out slowly, thankful that the macro was masking his brief loss of focus. Years before he had physically been in the same room with this individual, and that physical connection to the situation came as a shock to the Actuary, so used was he to being far above and far removed from the events of the universe.

The name burned in his mind as the Actuary calculated the astronomical unlikelihood of the cascading connections at work. As the Actuary drafted the acquisition order and added a deadly force authorization he could not help but feel haunted by the web of

synchronicity surrounding this man, knowing that he, himself had been touched by it.

"Quantum entanglement," whispered the Anointed Actuary as he sent the order across Grotto space.

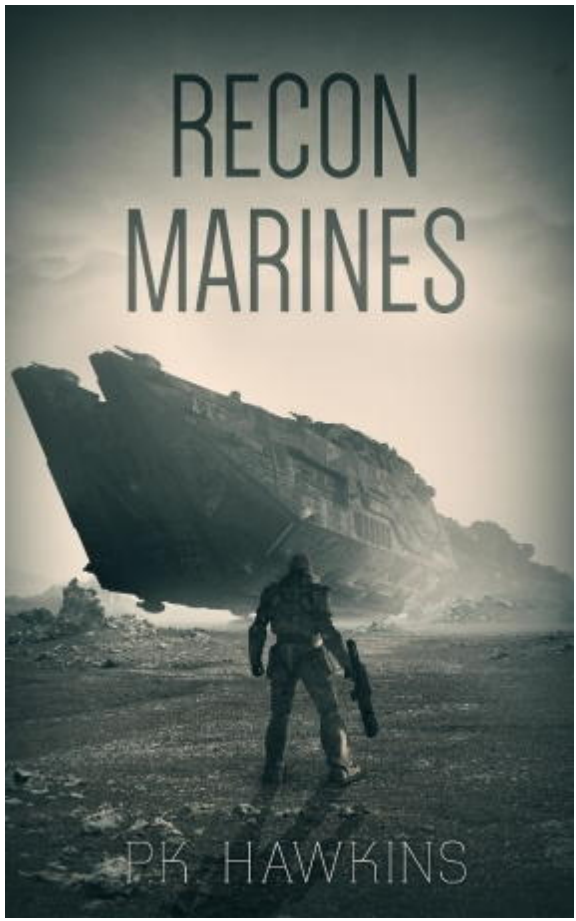
Then he sat and stared at the Reaper profile of Samuel Hyst.

The End

20. UNTIL THAT DAY

Thank you, once again, for taking this journey into the vast and treacherous expanse of Necrospace. I have always thought of this series as something of a noir take on military science fiction, and this particular novel represents an intentional attempt to capture that 'hardboiled' feel that one gets from the works of authors like Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. More dark adventure is on the way as new characters appear and exciting developments unfold in the lives of some familiar characters.

Read on for a free sample of *Recon Marines*



June 18, 2147 (Earth Calendar)
1433 Greenwich Mean Time
Location: Troop Transport *Franklin Dixon*, Near Ganymede
Marine Heartbeats Detected on Ship: 54

"Bad news, kids," a voice said through the overhead intercom. "Shore leave's been cancelled."

The Recon Marines in the mess hall collectively groaned. Many of them cursed. One of them, although Marsden didn't see who, angrily threw a wad of synthetic mashed potatoes at the wall. Marsden, however, had the opposite reaction. He laughed.

"Told you!" he said to everyone else that had been sitting at his table. "Pay up!"

“Man, you’re a sicko,” Llewellyn said as she unclipped her personal data monitor from the front of her uniform. “What kind of twisted bastard actually bets against us getting shore leave again?”

“The kind of twisted bastard that knows how things work around here and likes money,” Marsden said as he unclipped his own PDM and held it out over the center of the table. “Come on. Mossier, Chunda, you too. I believe that was five hundred scripunits each?” Mossier and Chunda both grumbled as they took out their PDMs, keyed in the amount of money they needed to transfer, and passed them over Marsden’s PDM. Once Llewellyn did the same, Marsden checked the PDM’s screen to make sure they hadn’t shorted him. He had fifteen hundred more scripunits in his personal account now.

“Laugh it up while you can,” Chunda grumbled at him. “One of these days you’re going to bet against shore leave, and then you won’t be coming back from that particular mission to spend your ill-gotten gains.” He put his PDM back and stood up. “See you all at the pods.”

Axel, the only other person at Marsden’s table, shook her head as the other three left. “I don’t understand why they haven’t learned yet. The odds of any Recon Marine ever getting to experience a full shore leave are twenty-three to one.”

“And when did you have time to calculate those odds?” Marsden asked her with a grin. She cocked her head as if that was the strangest question she had ever heard.

“Just now. Why?”

Marsden just shook his head. He had no doubt that she had indeed just figured that out in her head over the last several seconds, and that she honestly couldn’t comprehend why no one else could do the same. Unlike the others, who hadn’t bothered to put their lunch trays back into the cleaning unit as a sort of petty revenge at their situation, Marsden and Axel both properly disposed of their trays. A cleaning robot would be around to take care of any mess that got left behind while the marines were all in dilation-sleep, but Marsden felt bad about leaving messes behind for others to clean up, even if the one cleaning was a bot with no programmed personality. Axel, he assumed, took care of her own tray simply because it was the most logical thing to do.

“You sure you don’t want to make any bets on what the mission is this time?” Marsden asked Axel as they left the mess hall. Everyone else had already gone and would now either be in their sleep pods or else prepping for them. Marsden didn’t see any reason to hurry. Although the ship would be set to jump in the next ten minutes, it had safety features in place that would keep the ship from light jumping if it didn’t detect that every living being on board was tucked away safely.

“You don’t fool me, Marsden,” Axel said. The woman couldn’t really be said to have friends, but she said the words with the closest thing she was capable of to affection. “You always win your bets. Always. That sort of thing is statistically impossible, so it stands to reason that you either somehow manipulate the events ahead of time or, as would be more likely in this case, you have some prior knowledge of what is happening.”

Marsden kept a straight face. “Don’t be silly. How would I know in advance about something like this? Even the command pilots don’t know where we’re going until minutes before they have to get into their pods.”

“I don’t know,” Axel said. Her tone clearly indicated that she was annoyed that there was something she couldn’t figure out. “But it’s the only possibility.”

When they reached the main sleep pod chamber, Axel silently broke off from him and went one direction to her own pod while Marsden went the other. There were only a few marines that hadn’t sealed themselves in their pods yet. Marsden was completely unsurprised to find that Bayne was one of them. Bayne had the oversized pod next to Marsden’s. The pod were designed to be as cozy as possible around the marines while they were in dilation sleep, which meant that there had to be several different size pods to accommodate them all. Marsden’s was the average size, and Axel’s was among the smallest that the Recon Marines provided. Bayne’s was the biggest, and according to rumor had to be custom ordered, as none of the off-the-shelf models would fit his height and shoulder-width.

“Marsden,” Bayne said in his typical deep rumble of a voice. “Did she…”

“No,” Marsden said with a sigh.

“I didn’t even finish the question. How would you know what I was going to ask?”

“Because it’s the same damned question you always ask. No, Axel didn’t ask or say anything about you.”

“Nothing? Nothing at all?”

“Bayne, when are you going to give this up? Axel’s not into you.”

“You think she’s into someone else?” Bayne asked. For such a huge, intimidating man, he somehow managed to look very much like a scolded puppy.

“As far as I can tell, she’s not into anyone. I’ve never, ever seen her show any sort of romantic or sexual interest in anyone of any gender. I don’t even get why you’re so into her. There are plenty of women in the Recon Marines who would be more than happy to hook up with you.”

“I don’t want someone to hook up with. I want someone to connect with.”

“You have the body of a steel pillar,” Marsden said. He refrained from adding that Bayne also had the brains of one. “She has the body of a petite gymnast. She has the brain of a calculator. You, uh, don’t. What do you possibly think the two of you could connect over?”

“We both like explosions.”

Marsden had to shrug at that. They did indeed both like explosions. The difference was that for Bayne, it was an occasional diverting fling, while for Axel, it was a passionate love affair for the ages. There was a reason Axel was the explosive expert on the ship. Bayne was more of the heavy artillery type.

Once they had both finished their prep for the pods, Marsden got into his, pressed the button to close and seal it, then took a deep whiff of the fast-acting sleeping gas that flooded the chamber. He lost all consciousness for what felt like a mere five seconds for him, then a second gas pumped into the pod to wake him up. The pod opened and he carefully got out. Bayne did the same beside him, although the enormous man stumbled and almost fell.

“I hate that,” Bayne said. “Remind me again why we have to do that every single time the ship makes a jump?”

“Maybe because we don’t want to die or go insane?” Marsden asked.

“Right,” Bayne said. “There is that, I guess.”

Personally, Marsden had to wonder if Bayne’s abnormally sized sleep pod didn’t pump in enough gas each time, and it caused light brain damage on each jump, because he always asked that question every time. Marsden always gave the exact same answer, and Bayne always acted like he was hearing Marsden’s smartass remark for the first time.

The pods existed for two reasons. The first was to protect their bodies from the harsh and unusual forces working on the ship during a light jump. The second was to keep them from losing their minds from the jump’s weird time effects.

To everyone now leaving their pods and starting to suit up for the mission, it felt like only a matter of seconds had passed since they’d gotten in their pods. The actual time that would have passed according to the *Dixon*’s ship-board computer would have been anywhere between ten and fifteen minutes. And yet, the time that would have passed outside the ship, according to the standard Earth calendar, would be anywhere from two to three weeks, depending on how far exactly they had traveled. The light-jump caused time dilation effects, thanks to Einstein’s Special Theory of Relativity. It was why Recon Marines were encouraged not to have too many friends and

loved ones outside the service: to anyone back on the core planets, the people on these ships were barely aging, while to the people on the *Dixon*, everyone else aged slightly faster.

Marsden went to his equipment locker to get his gear. As he did, his PDM chirped right along with everyone else's. Marsden didn't bother to unclip his and look at it, as enough people around him were doing it that he could hear everything their incoming message said.

"Good day, marines," a gruff voice said from multiple PDMs. If Marsden had actually been looking at his instead of inspecting his helmet and light armor, he knew he would see an extreme close-up of a mustachioed man's face looking out at him through a static-filled blue screen. The Recon Marines tended to simply call the man Mister, although there was plenty of debate as to whether Mister existed at all or was just some computer program that sent them their orders for each mission.

"As you receive this message, the current time is"—Mister's voice was completely replaced for a second by a different, more obviously computer-generated voice—"1647 Greenwich Mean Time, August 2nd, 2147 Earth calendar."

Marsden paused in shrugging into his light armor, unsure that he had heard the date correctly. He almost thought it was just him, but the woman who had a locker next to his, Murakame, spoke up.

"Almost two months? Just how far exactly did we travel?"

It was a rhetorical question that no one bothered to answer. If they'd lost nearly two months instead of the standard two weeks, either something had gone wrong with the engines to make them go slower, or else they had travelled farther into the galaxy than any of them had ever been before. The first possibility was extremely unlikely, given how paranoid the Recon Marine techs were about making sure everything on the ship ran smoothly, so it was probably the second option.

A murmur passed through the marines as they registered this. A few sounded audibly nervous, while most of the others were excited. This was the kind of thing they'd signed up with the Recon Marines for, after all. If they'd wanted easy, safe jobs, they would have signed up for one of the core planet military branches or militias.

"You are all here because the Recon Marines have enacted the Elliot Contingency."

Marsden whistled. Wow, this was a big one. It was a good thing he hadn't bet Axel where they were going after all. He would have lost this one big time.

"What's the Elliot Contingency?" Bayne asked, a little too loudly, from his own locker. While Mister's speech had been pre-recorded

before they'd even been sent out, Marsden smiled at the way Mister seemed to anticipate Bayne's question.

"For those of you too lazy or illiterate to read your damned manuals," Mister said. "The Elliot Contingency is for when first contact is anticipated with a potentially hostile alien race."

"Wow, really?" a grunt named Nunez said from a few lockers down. "What does that put us at now?"

"If we confirm their presence," Axel called out from somewhere, "this would be the sixth sentient and intelligent non-human species we have made contact with." What she didn't say was that only two of them, so far, had been anything close to friendly toward humans. Although it might not be the best politics, the Recon Marines pretty much assumed by this point that they needed to be ready for hostile.

Mister continued while everyone finished gearing up. "On Earth Calendar May 28th, an automated deep-galactic probe returned to the outpost on Charon with data on several planets possibly capable of supporting human life. Before that information could be passed on to the Colonization Council, an anomaly was detected on the surface of a rocky and arid planet with the current temporary designation of Bullfinch-2.

"Further study of the data revealed the anomaly to be some kind of non-naturally occurring object suggestive of a ship design, although it is one that doesn't match any known design used by the known sentient species. Further data suggests energy patterns consistent with advanced weapon systems, although at this point that is mostly speculation. Command has determined that you marines are to use Pattern 37 in starting to approach the possible vessel, with pattern changes to be determined by M. Dollarhyde and R. Popkess at their discretion. Thus ends the briefing. Good luck, marines." The message ceased, and the image of the man with the mustache disappeared from all their PDMs.

"Alright, everyone, you heard Mister!" Popkess called out from the far end of the lockers. "Everyone designated for planet-fall as part of Pattern 37 needs to be fully prepped and ready in five minutes. Welcome to Bullfinch-2!"

Dollarhyde finished the traditional starting speech of Recon Marine missions. "Why do we do this, everyone?"

Every single marine in the room answered in unison. "Because no one else will!"

"Damned right," Popkess called out. "Now get your asses moving."

Recon Marines is available from Amazon here!

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